YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY okiura
THE ASTERISK WAR
07. FESTIVAL SYMPHONY

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07. FESTIVAL SYMPHONY

RUSALKA
MILUŠE
Miluše
PÄIVI
Päivi
Tuulia
TUULIA
Mahulena
MAHULENA
MONICA
Monica

"HUFENG, ARE YOU UNHAPPY WITH MY DECISION?"
"I CAN'T AGREE! WHY DO WE HAVE TO TEAM UP WITH THEM?!"
"WELL, I DON'T PARTICULARLY MIND."

Sylvia Lyyneheym
Sylvia Lyyneheym

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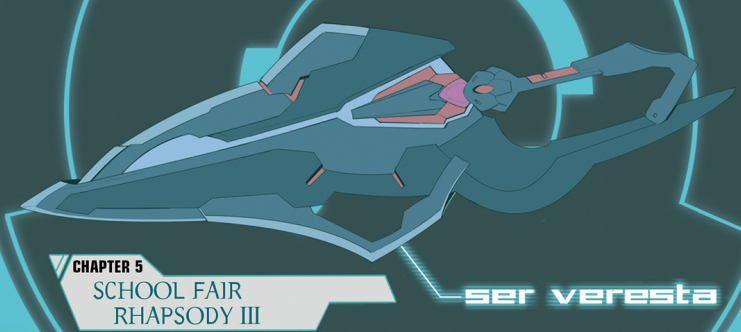

THE ASTERISK WAR

07. FESTIVAL SYMPHONY

YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION: OKIURA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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YUU MIYAZAKI

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characters

SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

AYATO AMAGIRI

Transferred to the high school division of Seidoukan Academy on a special scholarship. Though easygoing to a fault, he possesses an enormous amount of prana, as well as extraordinary skills with a sword.

ALIAS: Gathering Clouds, Murakumo
ORGA LUX: Ser Veresta

JULIS-ALEXIA VON RIESSFELD

A princess of Lieseltania and Seidoukan Academy's fifth-ranked fighter. With Ayato as her tag team partner, she has her mind set on winning the Festa.

ALIAS: the Witch of the Resplendent Flames, Glühen Rose
LUX: Aspera Spina

CLAUDIA ENFIELD

The student council president of Seidoukan Academy and the person responsible for bringing Ayato to the school. She always has a gentle smile but describes herself as "blackhearted." She's the second-ranked fighter in the school.

ALIAS: the Commander of a Thousand Visions, Parca Morta
ORGA LUX: Pan-Dora

SAYA SASAMIYA

Ayato's childhood friend who lived next door to him when they were young. Perpetually sleepy and inexpressive, and a firm believer that the bigger the gun, the better. She switches between several enormous Lux firearms in a fight.

ALIAS: none yet given
LUX: type 38 Lux grenade launcher Helnekraum, type 34 wave cannon Ark Van Ders Improved Model, and others

KIRIN TOUDOU

A first-year student in Seidoukan Academy's middle school. She became the academy's top-ranked fighter at the age of thirteen. The heir to the Toudou School, which boasts over ten thousand pupils worldwide, she has tremendous natural gifts as a swordsman.

ALIAS: the Keen-Edged Tempest, Shippuu Jinrai
LUX: none (wields the katana Senbakiri)

EISHIROU YABUKI

A young man in Seidoukan Academy's newspaper club, he seems to know everything about everything. Ayato's roommate, and a member of the special ops organization Shadowstar.

LESTER MACPHAIL

Seidoukan's ninth-ranked fighter.
ALIAS: the Ax of the Roaring Distance, Kornephoros

RANDY HOOKE

Lester's partner for the Phoenix.

KYOUKO YATSUZAKI

Ayato's homeroom teacher. A former champion of the Gryps tournament.

PREVIOUSLY IN *THE ASTERISK WAR*...

Having taken the championship at the Phoenix, Ayato and company head to Julis's home country of Lieseltania. Their holiday comes to a swift end after an interrupted victory party, an encounter with Orphelia, the Witch of Solitary Venom, and a sudden assault on the city. When Ayato learns that his missing sister has been found, he hurries back to Asterisk. After he discovers Haruka has been in a constant state of sleep for the past five years, the head of Allekant's Tenorio faction, Magnum Opus, appears before him with a proposal...

CHAPTER 1
MAGNUM OPUS'S INVITATION

"So what did you want to talk about?"

They were in the courtyard of Seidoukan Academy. No sooner had they reached the gazebo nestled in the corner of the garden than Julis spoke up.

Just a few moments earlier, in the student council room, Ayato had declared that he would join Claudia's team for the Gryps as its fifth member. Then, as they'd all left, he'd pulled Julis aside, stating there was something he had to discuss with her.

"Straight to the point, as always, I see," she quipped back.

"You know I don't like beating around the bush. And besides, it's cold out here."

It was midwinter in Asterisk. The temperature wasn't as low as it had been in Lieseltania—where they had been staying until just a few days ago—but standing still as they were in the empty garden, the cold seeped deep into their bones.

"Do you want to go somewhere else?" he asked. There wasn't any particular reason why they had to talk in the courtyard, after all.

"Don't worry about it. You wanted to come here because you didn't want anyone to overhear us, right?"

"Well, not exactly… I'm gonna tell the others, too, eventually. It's just…I thought I'd better talk it over with you first."

Julis raised her eyebrows slightly. "Hmm… Well, you don't look very happy about it, whatever it is. We're going to be busy preparing for the Gryps starting tomorrow, so you'd better just have out with it."

Now that she had organized her team, Claudia was eager to begin training together immediately and had instructed them all to meet in the training room the following day.

"I know," Ayato replied, pausing for a moment as he looked at Julis head-on. "I told you earlier about what happened at the hospital…but there's something I left out."

"Oh?"

Madiath had contacted him the other day, and he had finally been able to see his sister again. However, it seemed Haruka had used her ability on herself and had been in a state close to suspended animation for the past five years. Even Yan Korbel, the director of the hospital, hadn't been able to find a way to wake her. That was as far as he had explained to Julis and the others, but then —

"—On the way back from the hospital, I bumped into Magnum Opus."

No sooner had he spoken the name than Julis's eyes opened wide, a dangerous glint emerging from deep inside them. "What did you just say…?"

Anger dripped from her muffled voice. It was enough to make Ayato, who had already been steeling himself against her response, flinch.

Her reaction was to be expected. Magnum Opus was, after all, the mastermind who had robbed Julis of her best friend, Orphelia. It was only natural she would hold a grudge.

"…"

But at the moment, Julis merely clenched her fists, standing ramrod straight and grinding her teeth, with her eyes tightly shut. She looked to be attempting to hold back the violent emotions rushing up from inside her.

Finally, after a long moment, she opened her eyes, letting out an all but inaudible sigh. The young woman fixed Ayato with a piercing glare.

"Tell me everything." She spoke the words as if they'd been wrung out of her body.

Ayato nodded, his expression stern. "It was three days ago. After leaving the hospital, I had parted ways with Commander Lindwall, when I'd heard a voice call out to me from behind. And she said, out of nowhere, 'If you let me, I can cure your sister.'"

"…"

Julis startled. She seemed to be about to say something, but Ayato continued:

“And then, she—Hilda Jane Rowlands—called herself Magnum Opus…”

Ayato lifted his gaze slightly and in a quiet voice began to tell her everything about the encounter.

*

“You’re…Magnum Opus…?”

The unexpected name caused Ayato to brace for trouble.

But the woman who had called out to him—Hilda—nodded calmly, with a faint smirk. “Ah, don’t misunderstand me. It isn’t as if I asked for such a high-and-mighty name. I’m actually quite humble. But you know, everyone at Allekant just started calling me that, so I never had much choice. Never mind how strange or uncomfortable it might make me feel… Anyway, as long as you can produce results over there, they give you a marvelous environment to pursue research, no matter what you do. Most of the time, at least. It’s a wonderful place, really.”

The night was already late. The hospital reception had long since closed. The complex did of course have an entrance for emergencies, but it was located on the other side of the building, away from the main gate. The darkness around them was illuminated only by the faint light of the streetlamps.

“Let me ask you something… Is it true you turned Orphelia Landlufen into a Strega?”

“Oh my, so you know about that, do you? I don’t believe that experiment has even been publicly announced yet… But truthfully, that makes things a bit easier,” she said, her eyes narrowing as she broke out into her distinctive, rasping laugh. “Indeed, indeed. That was quite a special specimen, you know. Ah, if only I still had my hands on it, who knows how much invaluable data I would be able to glean? It’s really quite a shame how things ended up.” She shook her head as if in sorrow, pouting sourly. “It’s all the fault of those vixens at Le Wolfe, you know. Stealing someone’s hard-earned research out from under them—how awful could you be? It’s unforgivable.”

From the way she was talking, it was clear that Hilda viewed Orphelia as no more than a research subject. Ayato couldn’t help but frown in distaste. She seemed to lack any sense of human empathy.

“But there’s no point brooding over it now, is there? Us researchers have to keep our eyes on the future. Which. Is. Why,” she continued, in a staccato rhythm as she pulled herself toward the boy suddenly, flashing him a strangely satisfied and clearly ominous smile. “What do you say, Ayato Amagiri? Why don’t we help each other out, for the sake of both our futures?”

“Help you…?”

If he had been his normal self, he would have turned her down immediately, but the image of his sister, whom he had not seen in more than five years, floated up before him, and he found himself hesitating.

“Miss Rowlands… Is it true that you can heal her…?”

Once more, the woman broke out into that strange laughter. “You can call me Hilda. As for your question, the answer is yes. Leave it to me, and I’ll wake your little sleeping beauty.”

She beamed, giving him an exaggerated bow.

“…How?”

“Well, now. There’s no short explanation for that, but if you wish… Your sister used her own abilities as a Strega to bind herself, correct? Normally, to dispel that kind of ability externally, we would have to forcefully expel the mana, but in order to do *that*, we would first have to analyze the junction pattern between prana and mana. It’s a lot like a fingerprint—different for everyone. The

reason Director Korbel has had such a hard time with your sister is because, in her case, her junction pattern is so complicated. Do you understand so far?"

Ayato nodded.

Hilda continued slowly, as if lecturing a child. "But that isn't the biggest problem. Even after analyzing the junction pattern, we would need a special device in order to actually dispel the mana. But in your sister's case, the prana used to bind her is so strong that it's beyond the scope of the technology available to this hospital. After all, the greater the amount of prana that's involved, the greater the amount of mana acting in concert to it."

"What kind of special device are you talking about?"

"It's called a mana accelerator. In short, it's a device for controlling mana, at least to some extent, without having to rely on using the prana from a Strega or a Dante as an intermediary. By accelerating mana, it's possible to reach a high-energy state without requiring mediation *through* prana. Just so you know, it can't re-create an ability—but by tracing the junction pattern with mana in this state, it *is* possible to cancel out the effects of one. So if you want to dispel the effects of your sister's binding ability, you're going to need a mana accelerator quite a bit more powerful than what this hospital has to offer."

The details still eluded him, but Ayato was beginning to comprehend the theory. It still wasn't enough to convince him to give his consent, however.

"In that case, as long as he used a powerful enough mana accelerator, even Director Korbel ought to be able to dispel it, then…"

At this, Hilda interrupted, clicking her tongue and waving a finger at him. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. I'm afraid Director Korbel doesn't quite have the aptitude required to use that kind of mana accelerator. But it isn't just him. No, I think you'll find that I'm the only researcher who has experience using one on a human subject. Hee-hee-hee." That dry, rasping laughter erupted forth once more, before finally subsiding as Hilda glanced back at him, her eyes upturned. "Ah, but if you insist, there's no harm in asking the director yourself. I won't mind."

"…"

Faced with the girl's overwhelming sense of confidence, Ayato found himself at a loss for words.

She was probably telling the truth.

"…In that case, what do you want?"

"Oh?"

She had suggested they help each other, so there had to be something she wanted from him in return.

"Oh, I see, I see, you're a quick learner, aren't you? Well, you don't need to worry. It isn't particularly complicated."

"H-hold on a minute!" Ayato stammered, trying to remind Hilda that he hadn't yet accepted her proposal, but he found his body stiffening as she continued.

"—All I want from you is that you win in the Gryps." She spoke calmly, quite as if she were doing no more than placing an order at a local restaurant.

"You want me to win…?"

"The Lindvolus would have been fine, too, but I'm afraid I can't afford to wait until next winter. Don't worry; I've already heard. You've joined the student council president's team, right?"

"That doesn't mean we'll be able to win, though…"

Given its members, it would without doubt be a powerful team, but that didn't mean they could afford to underestimate what the tournament might throw at them.

"Don't worry, don't worry. So long as you and that student council president work together, it's all but guaranteed," Hilda said, nodding to herself.

"…In other words, you're hoping to have your wish granted through me?"

"Well…if you want to put it that way, I guess you could say that," she answered, her slightly dissatisfied expression suggesting she wasn't particularly happy with that description.

"What do you want, specifically?"

"Yes, well, assuming you win the tournament, I'd like you to have my penalty canceled."

"…Your penalty?"

"That's right. The truth is, there was a little accident a few years ago, and for some reason, I alone had to take the blame for it. And well, that's why I said Allekant's a good place *most of the time*. I guess it was one of those things that fall outside that range. Personally, I didn't think just one or two laboratories would really matter that much to them… But anyway, ever since that happened, I haven't been free to do what I want anymore." She let out a deep

sigh. “The worst part of it all is that they’ve put restrictions on my use of the facilities, and I’m not allowed to use anything designated level five. So my research has reached a standstill. Thanks to that, I’ve been spending my time dealing with assigned work that I don’t have the slightest interest in… I’m fed up with it all.”

She shook her head exaggeratedly, but she stopped suddenly in mid-movement, before turning back to Ayato, her head tilted down, eyeing him over the rims of her glasses. “But the real issue is this. At one of those level-five facilities, in Geneva, there’s a heavy-duty mana accelerator. That’s the facility my team used in the past. I had it customized for my research.”

“!” Ayato was startled as the pieces finally clicked together.

In other words, Hilda would have to use that facility in order to awaken Haruka. That had to be it.

Hilda nodded as she let out a joyful laugh. “Hee-hee-hee. Yes, yes, that’s right. It’s a matter of give-and-take, an equal trade, if you will. If you can get my penalty canceled, I’ll be able to resume my research, and if I can resume my research, I’ll be able to wake your sister. It’s beautifully simple, really.” She seemed so amused by it all that her body was visibly trembling.

Ayato, of course, wasn’t so naive as to accept it all at face value. “Before that, could you tell me a little about your research?” he asked.

“Hmm?” Hilda seemed to be taken aback by his question; her eyes widened with surprise behind the rims of her glasses. “Well, why not? To put it simply, my research involves finding a way to create Genestella a posteriori.”

She spoke as if it were an everyday matter, but the idea bordered on the preposterous. The differences between normal humans and Genestella started with the presence or absence of prana and extended all the way to the strength of their physical builds, their muscle tissue, and even the composition of their blood.

If, for example, her research goal was to increase the possibility of yet-unborn children being Genestella, that would be one thing—even if there was of course an ethical problem with that—but changing the body of a posteriori was, from Ayato’s perspective, tantamount to playing God.

Normally, he wouldn’t have given the notion so much as a second thought.

Now that he knew about Orphelia, however…

“But in that case, hasn’t your research already been successful…?”

“Ah, you mean Orphelia Landlufen?” Hilda nodded, her expression conflicted. “I certainly haven’t had a success like that again. Not only did I manage to clear the hurdle of turning a normal human into a Genestella in one go; I turned her into a Strega—perhaps the strongest in history at that.” But despite what she was saying, her expression was clouded. “However…to be perfectly honest with you, that was somewhat irregular, even for me.”

“Irregular?”

“I formulated the perfect theory, built on years of research, and put it into practice, creating what you might call the ultimate Strega. There’s no doubt about that. But then, when I repeated the experiment with the exact same conditions, I couldn’t reproduce it…”

So Orphelia was the only success…?

Ayato finally understood.

Hilda’s shoulders slumped. “The results are completely meaningless if they aren’t reproducible. In this world, we don’t have the luxury of accepting things that can’t be controlled.”

“Things that can’t be controlled…?”

Hilda lifted her head. “Oh my, you hadn’t realized?” Her mouth twisted into a self-satisfied grin. “Among people with abilities, such as Stregas and Dantes, there are those who have incredibly beneficial ones. People who have the power to contribute to more diverse fields than merely fighting it out against one another in an arena. But the integrated enterprise foundations who control everything don’t see that as a good thing. Why do you think that is? It’s simple, really. People’s abilities are ultimately individual qualities, and they can be extremely unstable depending upon one’s way of thinking. And being individual qualities, they’re guaranteed to be lost one day. If worse came to worst, it would be a great calamity if someone were to put the wrong gear into this machine we call society, only to have it break down, don’t you think?”

“…Are you saying the integrated enterprise foundations don’t trust Stregas and Dantes?”

“Strictly speaking, they don’t trust Genestella in general. After all, there’s never been so much as a single Genestella to reach an important executive position in any of them.”

Even Ayato understood well enough how Genestella were perceived in the wider world. That said, being reminded of it like this, he couldn't help but feel a vague sense of discomfort welling up in his chest.

It probably had something to do with the fact that he had visited Lieseltania just the other day.

"The same thing goes for Orga Luxes—or rather, for urm-manadite. Take your friend the Gravisheath, for example. Even the most advanced meteoric engineering technology has only been able to partially control its ability to manipulate gravity. But there are only a few people capable of drawing on the kind of power necessary to control an Orga Lux. And given that the power of Orga Luxes can't be replicated, and that there's always a risk of them having a violent episode, the integrated enterprise foundations only tolerate them to a certain extent. Which is why once they've finished gathering as much data as they can from them, they're loaned out to the academy under their management as toys. That's what Orga Luxes are." Hilda paused there for a moment, slowly spreading her hands, before continuing. "If Genestella are going to be accepted in this world, it's vital that everything about them be carefully explained, that every concern that people have be addressed, and that people understand that it's possible to control them. My research should help bring that forward."

"…So that's your goal?"

"Yes, exactly. Oh, this won't do, not at all. I'm afraid I've strayed from the topic at hand. So, will you give me your answer?"

Ayato pondered it all for a brief moment, before staring straight into Hilda's erratic eyes. "I can't accept."

"Oh?" Hilda stared back at him in surprise. "Would you mind telling me why?"

If he was being honest with himself, Ayato thought, it was hard to imagine a more appealing offer than what Hilda was presenting to him.

Having finally found Haruka, there was now nothing he wanted more than to be able to wake her from her endless sleep. There were so many things he had to tell her. He wanted to hear her voice again. And more than anything, he wanted to see her smile.

But if that came at the cost of repeating the tragedy that had befallen Orphelia… Not only would he be unable to face Julis; he wouldn't be able to explain himself to Haruka, either.

If he understood her situation correctly, Hilda was presently unable to continue her research. If that were the case, he couldn't afford to let her free.

"To put it bluntly, I don't trust you."

"…I see. That's a shame." Her shoulders slumped, as if she truly were disappointed. "I understand. In that case, I'll leave it at that for now. However…" She paused there, her voice assuming an air of deep importance, her expression deathly serious. "Remember this, Ayato Amagiri. You *will* ask me for my help, sooner or later. I'm sure of it."

"…"

Ayato stood in silence, meeting her gaze head-on.

"Well then, we'll meet again," she finished with that characteristic laugh, dry and snappish like clothes rustling in the wind.

Likewise, her white gown fluttered as she spun around and disappeared into the darkness.

*

"…I see."

As Ayato finished his tale, Julis let out a slow, deep sigh.

The red curtain of dusk had fallen over them, and the trees nearby cast long, dark shadows across the courtyard.

"I understand the situation. But are you sure you're okay with it?"

"Huh?"

While Ayato paused, taken aback, Julis continued, "Of course I'll never be able to forgive Opus, but those are my own personal feelings. I can't allow anyone else to suffer what Orphelia has. However, one might call that no more than me being self-righteous."

"But, Julis, that's—"

"No, I understand. I couldn't have been happier than when you said you'd turned her down. But at the same time, I can't help but feel guilty about it… Because of me, you can't do what you want…" She flashed him a weak, forced smile, before casting her gaze to her feet. "When it comes down to it, even my own wish is just me being selfish. So, if you really want to wake your sister up, I won't blame you for it, no matter what you do. Just remember that."

“Julis…,” Ayato murmured.

He had never expected her to say such a thing. It was strangely touching.

“Thank you. But it’s okay. I understand, now that I’ve met her. Magnum Opus can’t be trusted.”

They had only spoken for a short time, but it had been enough for him to catch a glimpse of a level of repulsiveness he had never before seen.

“Although she probably wasn’t lying about being able to wake your sister.”

“…Yeah, that’s what I thought, too.”

There was no mistaking the fact that she couldn’t be trusted, but she also didn’t seem like the kind of person to come out with such a bald-faced lie. On that point, she wasn’t unlike Dirk Eberwein, the student council president at Le Wolfe. But there was an air of danger about Hilda that went far beyond that which surrounded Dirk.

“I’ve confirmed it with Director Korbel. On a theoretical level at least, it certainly seems possible that her method might be able to wake Haruka. And she’s probably right about being the only one who would be able to do it… Not that the director wanted to admit it…”

Which meant she wasn’t lying about that, at least.

But that didn’t necessarily mean there wasn’t any other way of waking Haruka.

“I’ll find another way to wake her, one that doesn’t mean relying on Magnum Opus. We’ll have to win the Gryps to be able to do that, though.”

Even if it were impossible for him to do anything for his sister alone, with the help of the integrated enterprise foundations, it should be possible. That wasn’t to say he could fully trust them, either, but they were better than Hilda.

“I see… I guess that explains your enthusiasm.”

Perhaps she was remembering their discussion in the student council room, when Ayato had told them all to clinch a win.

Julis nodded in understanding. “Okay. In any case, I’m dead set on winning, too. So let’s put everything we’ve got into it.”

“Right.”

Truth be told, he had been fretting over his interaction with Hilda ever since their discussion outside the hospital, but now that

he'd told Julis about it, he finally felt that he had made the right decision.

Now, he just had to keep moving forward.

*

The following day, in Claudia's exclusive training room:

"Now then, we'll be facing off in the Gryps as a team… But we still have to decide on the most important thing," Claudia said, glancing at her assembled team members—Ayato, Julis, Saya, and Kirin—in turn.

"The most important thing?" Saya repeated, cocking her head.

Claudia nodded, her expression grave. "The name of the team, of course."

At that moment, Julis, who had been leaning forward in anticipation, suddenly lost her balance. “How is that important?!”

“Oh, but we’ll be introduced to the whole world under that name. It wouldn’t do to enter under something silly now, would it?”

“That might be true…but there’s still plenty of things more important than that,” Julis muttered.

Kirin, standing beside her, timidly raised a hand. “Um… What kind of names are the other teams using?”

“Well now, let me see. The most famous would of course be Gallardworth’s Silverwinged Knights. They’re organized into two teams based on their ranking in the Named Cult: Numbers one to five make up Team Lancelot, and numbers six to ten make up Team Tristan. And I’m sure you’ve all heard about Queenvale’s Team Rusalka. It’s the same as the band.”

Rusalka was an all-girl rock band famous throughout the world. While perhaps not as well-known as Sylvia Lyyneheym, they were extremely popular with the younger generation, with an army of dedicated fans. Even Ayato had heard of them and was familiar with several of their songs.

“What happens to the teams that don’t register a name?”

“When that happens, the name of the team’s representative is used. For example, if the representative’s name is Tanaka, they would be known as Team Tanaka.”

“Isn’t that fine?” Julis blurted out. She seemed completely disinterested in the topic.

“Oh my. I didn’t realize you were so taken by Team Tanaka.”

“You know that’s not what I meant! I meant that seeing as you’re the representative, Team Enfield would do!”

“If you’re all okay with that, I don’t mind… But we haven’t even discussed whether I should be the representative yet.”

“You’re the one who asked us all to join, so it makes sense to me,” Ayato said.

“…I agree.” Saya nodded.

“M-me too!” Kirin chimed in.

Though making a sour face, Julis nodded.

“I see. In that case, I’ll presume to put myself down as our representative,” Claudia said, bowing her head.

“Ah! Miss President, are you going to put yourself forward for

reelection as student council president next year, too?"

"That was my plan… Why do you ask, Miss Toudou? Are you interested in the job?"

Kirin shook her head forcefully. "N-no way! I'm not cut out for that…! I—I was just wondering, it wouldn't be too hard, would it? Doing both jobs…?"

Claudia always seemed to be busy with one thing or another, and so Kirin, in her own way, must have been concerned for her.

"There's no need to worry about that." Claudia laughed. "I enjoy being on the student council, after all."

"Well, I don't think there's anyone at Seidoukan more suited to it than you. I'd be surprised if anyone even put their name forward to run against you," Julis added.

Saya and Ayato nodded in agreement.

Claudia was the kind of person who seemed able to handle anything that was thrown at her, and her accomplishments as student council president were recognized by everyone at Seidoukan.

"By the way, I'd like to hear more about what you said yesterday," Julis said.

"And what would that be?"

"You said that your wish might make an enemy out of Galaxy."

Everyone's eyes swung toward Claudia.

The discussion had been left unsettled, so Ayato was a little worried about it, too.

"I see. You might be disappointed." Claudia caught her breath before continuing. "My wish is to be able to have a little talk with someone who's currently imprisoned."

"…That's it? Just to talk?" Julis stared at her blankly.

"Indeed. But it's more difficult than you might think. The person I want to talk with was involved in the Jade Twilight Incident. Strictly speaking, they were the ideological leader behind the group."

"!" The four of them gasped in surprise.

The Jade Twilight Incident was the largest terrorist attack in Asterisk's history. Even now, the topic was considered taboo, and the truth behind what really happened was still shrouded in mystery.

"The trials relating to the Jade Twilight Incident were all conducted in a special court at the behest of the integrated

enterprise foundations, with the vast majority of them being closed to the public… Even some of the judgments haven't been made public. The person whom I want to meet is one of those cases."

"Um, do you know this person's name…?" Kirin asked.

"Of course. I don't think any of you know him. His name is Ladislav Bartošik."

Judging by their expressions, neither Kirin nor Julis had heard of him. Ayato wasn't familiar with the name, either.

But to his surprise, Saya slowly raised her hand.

"…I know him."

"My, is that so? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, Miss Sasamiya."

"Oh?" Julis turned toward Saya, her curiosity piqued. "Who is he?"

"He's a famous researcher of Luxes and Orga Luxes. He's written several important theses on the latter in particular. Important enough that his name will probably be remembered throughout history. But I read somewhere that he went missing. And I think he was even a teacher here at Seidoukan…" Saya had been talking quite freely up to this point, but she suddenly fell silent, as if her own train of thought had taken her to something unspeakable.

"That's right, he used to teach at Seidoukan's college, although it sounds like he didn't take on many classes. He seems to have preferred shutting himself away in Galaxy's laboratory whenever he could. The Orga Lux he created during that time was this very Pan-Dora," Claudia said, taking the Orga Lux's activator from its holder at her waist.

"Oh, so he was the one who made the Pan-Dora…?" Kirin asked, impressed.

Julis, however, was wearing a grave expression. "No, more importantly… If that's true, it means the ideological leader behind the Jade Twilight Incident was here at Seidoukan…"

"…That's scandalous."

"Ah…! Th-that's right! So that's why you're being targeted by Galaxy…?"

"Probably." Claudia laughed, as if to dodge the question.

Julis, however, wasn't about to let it go. "So what on earth do you have to talk about with him?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you all just yet. If I did, there's a high

chance I would end up putting you all in danger. Even now, all contact with him is strictly prohibited," Claudia said, rejecting Julis's demand calmly yet decisively. "But like I told you all the other day, Galaxy is still probably only monitoring my movements. They shouldn't try anything major until at least the summer."

"…"

But Ayato, at some vague level, wasn't entirely satisfied with her explanation.

There was no doubt that the subject touched on some well-kept secret involving Seidoukan and Galaxy, something so dark that if it were to come out, it could cause quite a scandal. But even so, the Jade Twilight Incident had happened years ago. Even if there was a chance they might end up bringing something to light, was it really so bad that Galaxy would feel it had to move against them directly?

And besides, it sounds like Claudia still hasn't told us everything…

There had to be more than she let on, Ayato felt.

"Now then, let's put that little digression aside and deal with the matter at hand, shall we?"

"The matter at hand?"

"Yes. Out of all the Festa events, the Gryps is said to offer the most surprises for a reason, after all. Essentially, it's possible to overcome differences in ability through a well-developed strategy. So we all need to have a good grasp of one another's talents." Claudia paused, activating the Pan-Dora in her hand. "On that note, it's time you all knew about this one's true power."

CHAPTER 2
RECT LUX

“The Pan-Dora’s true power…?”

Ayato, Julis, Saya, and Kirin each caught their breath.

The true power of Claudia’s Orga Lux, the twin blades of the Pan-Dora: precognition.

But no one knew exactly how it worked—for example, exactly how many seconds into the future it could see. That was partly because Claudia was the only person who had ever been able to wield it.

Of course, those who created it probably knew, but given that the development of Orga Luxes was a closely held secret even within the IEFs, there was practically zero chance that the information would come out that way.

In the end, people could only grasp at rumors, its abilities remaining unknown to the public even now.

“Let me start by laying out the facts. As you have all no doubt heard, the Pan-Dora’s ability is precognition, the power to look into the future. At present, I can see around three hundred seconds ahead.”

“—?!”

“Th-three hundred seconds?!”

This revelation left the four of them speechless.

Three hundred seconds… In other words, she could see her opponents’ moves five minutes into the future. The Gryps might not be comparable to the Phoenix, but some of Ayato’s matches there hadn’t even lasted that long. Which meant that Claudia would have been able to see everything, from beginning to end, before the

match had even begun.

If that was the case, it was hard to see how she could possibly have been defeated.

“However… Those three hundred seconds are more of a stock than anything else.”

“A stock…?” Kirin repeated, cocking her head in confusion.

Julis, in contrast, nodded, her eyes opening wide as if suddenly understanding. “So that’s it…”

“You’re fast on the uptake. I suppose I should expect no less from a Strega.” Claudia smiled.

Julis smiled right back at her. “What you’re saying is that there’s a limit on how much you can use it, right?”

“Correct,” Claudia answered with a slow clap.

It took him a moment, but Ayato finally understood what the girls were saying. “So… If, for example, you were to look ten seconds into the future right now, you’d be left with two hundred and ninety seconds in your stock?”

“Indeed, that’s how it works.”

“So you can’t keep using it forever…”

“That reminds me, you said the Pan-Dora has a weakness. What did you mean, exactly?” Julis asked.

She was probably referring to the conversation that they had had on their way to Lieseltania, back when Claudia had first asked them all to join her team.

“Indeed. If I were to use up the entire stock, this darling would be no more than any other pair of swords. I’ve worked out a technique to use up the stock as little as possible, so that I can avoid exhausting it. I started laying the groundwork in my first match.”

“Your first match? You mean back when you were in middle school?” Julis asked.

Kirin caught on immediately. “You battled against the student ranked twentieth, right?”

“My, is it really so famous?”

If it had been back when she was in middle school, that would mean it must have been before either Kirin or Julis had come to Asterisk.

“You haven’t been in many matches, but that’s the most famous out of all of them. Most people who think of challenging you will no doubt watch that video and quickly change their mind,” Julis answered bitterly.

Perhaps she was referring to herself, too, Ayato wondered.

"U-um, I've got some data on it," Kirin said, promptly opening an air-window displaying a video of the match.

The figure standing in the middle of the stage was unmistakably Claudia, though she looked somewhat younger than she did now.

Her opponent was considerably older, perhaps around twenty years old, holding a sword-type Lux in his right hand and a gun type in his left.

"Oh, a sword *and* a gun, huh?"

He looked to be focusing entirely on offense.

"Back then, people tended to put too much emphasis on offensive strategies. And he was quite skilled, too," Claudia told them.

"…You sound like you're boasting. We already know the result," Julis muttered.

Meanwhile, in the video, the combatants' school crests announced the beginning of the match, and the man opened fire with a barrage of glowing bullets.

Claudia, however, dodged them all easily, with only the slightest of movements.

"Wha—? Hold on… Your eyes were closed?!" Ayato murmured in astonishment.

There was no mistaking it. Claudia wasn't even maintaining a fighting posture, merely slouching forward with her eyes closed.

Even the people in the gallery seemed to have noticed, as a hushed buzz was spreading among them. Claudia's opponent had turned red with anger. He'd probably thought she was making fun of him.

He began to close the distance between them, sweeping his sword from side to side.

Claudia, stepping back to dodge his slashes and twisting her upper body to evade the bullets he fired off toward her one after the other, still hadn't opened her eyes.

The gallery exploded with excitement.

The man kept launching one attack after another, but Claudia evaded them all, blade and bullets alike.

This wasn't to say the man was weak or lacking in skill. As Claudia had said, he was quite proficient with his chosen weapons. He wasn't throwing all his weight behind any one attack but kept launching a considerable number of strikes at close range that

would have overwhelmed all but the most skilled of opponents.

But no matter how fiercely he attacked, Claudia's expression remained tranquil as she stepped around his every blow, as if in the middle of a dance.

"…This is it. Watch carefully."

Seemingly with no warning, Claudia leaped through the air over one of the man's wide lunges. Her opponent, no doubt thinking she had left herself open, unable to evade his attacks in midair, fired off a barrage of bullets.

But then, while spinning through the air, Claudia swung the twin swords for the first time since the match had begun.

She swept aside the bullets of light, scattering them in every direction, before landing next to her stupefied opponent, gently stepping to the side as she sliced clean through his school crest.

And with that, the usual mechanical sound signaled the end of the match.

Claudia opened her eyes slowly, smiling toward the audience and bowing with her usual grace.

"…That was unbelievable."

"Tell me about it…"

"Well, it was a performance designed to create a certain image," Claudia said, lifting a hand to her mouth as if to conceal a smile.

"This must have been what started the rumor about you seeing the future…"

There was no doubt about it. That kind of performance would be impossible without the power of precognition.

And there would be very few students crazy enough to challenge her after watching that.

"Yes. I saved up a lot of time for that match, but thanks to that, I was able to give off that impression. Ever since then, even after I reached number two, there haven't been many people willing to challenge me."

The amount of time that the Pan-Dora could see into the future decreased the more she used it, so it stood to reason that she would want to employ it as little as possible.

If that match had been a performance to achieve that goal, then it had been quite a cunning plan indeed.

It reminded Ayato of another aspect of the Pan-Dora.

"…I have a question," Saya said, raising a hand. "Seeing as you

chose that plan, does the precognition stock replenish over time?"

It seemed Saya was thinking along the same lines as Ayato.

If the Pan-Dora had only ever had a fixed stock, then it would be rendered useless once it had all been depleted. In that case, Claudia's performance would have been meaningless.

"That's a very good question. The answer is yes. Even if I don't do anything, so long as my contract with the Pan-Dora remains valid, the stock will increase gradually over time."

So that's it…

It would have become easier to stock more time after first making an initial investment that reduced the total amount of matches she had to participate in. That must have been her plan.

And it had succeeded.

But in that case…

"Um, how quickly does it recover?"

"Roughly speaking, around three days for each second."

"Three days for one second…? I see why you can't afford to waste it," Julis muttered, her expression unreadable.

Ayato had realized something else. "And it has the *worst personality*…"

"Huh?" Julis turned toward him quizzically. "What are you talking about, Ayato?"

"Ah, well… The truth is, Claudia's told me a little about the Pan-Dora before. That its user ends up experiencing their own death in their dreams."

At that announcement, Julis's and the other two girls' expressions underwent a complete and utter change.

"Th-that's too cruel…" Looking on the edge of tears, Kirin glanced toward Claudia.

Claudia merely nodded, flashing them all a brief smile.

But that still wasn't the Pan-Dora's worst quality.

Given that it took three days to be able to use its abilities for one second, mastering the Orga Lux meant that its wielder had to remain close to it for a long period of time. Essentially, that meant that they could only draw upon its power by experiencing their own death, not only once but every single night, prolonging their suffering without end.

Claudia had once said to Ayato that the Pan-Dora had the worst personality, and he could see no reason to disagree with her.

"So, there's a steep price for that kind of ability… But in spite

of that…," Julis stammered, unable to finish her thought.

"…It sounds awful," Saya added, her expression morose.

"Hee-hee. Please, there's no need to worry for my sake," Claudia said with a chuckle. "It isn't so bad as you all seem to think. And besides… As its user, I can tell you that its power isn't absolute," she said nonchalantly. "As I said earlier, it might be precognition, but it isn't invincible. Allow me to explain… Ayato, do you think you can take a fighting stance?"

"Huh? Ah, all right…" He broke his seal and activated the Ser Veresta.

"Now, then," Claudia said with a grin, when—

"!"

Ayato, feeling a chill come over him, jumped back reflexively, swinging the Ser Veresta to his left.

Claudia had drawn the Pan-Dora with a delicate flourish, then lunged forward with a blow that he had been able to parry only at the very last moment.

"…That was fast, Claudia," he said with a forced smile.

She withdrew her sword, shrugging. "As I thought, it doesn't work on you."

Judging by how much strength she had put into the attack, he could tell that she hadn't intended to hit him, but he still felt a rush of alarm at how close she had come to doing so.

"Now then, as you all saw, Ayato parried my attack wonderfully. If I had used the Pan-Dora's precognition one second before striking—strictly speaking, even half a second is enough to judge the success of an attack, but let's just go with one second for the sake of the argument—I would have been able to foresee what just happened." She paused there for a moment, returning the Pan-Dora to its holder. "In that case, how would I plan my next move? Just then, I attacked from the right, so maybe I would consider attacking from the left. While the Pan-Dora never lies, the future is always changing. And so, *if I decide to change my actions, the future will change as well*. So you might say that the Pan-Dora's ability lets me judge the best course of action through repeated trial and error without any risk of failure."

"The future is always changing…?" Ayato found himself muttering.

It seemed so obvious, but for some reason the words kept echoing in his head.

“Now, I just consumed a second of my stock to see what would happen if I attacked from the left, but Ayato might have blocked that, too. So let’s try seeing what would happen if I attacked from above and below. I’ve now consumed four seconds of my stock, but I still haven’t found an outcome where I manage to succeed. That’s to be expected. If you take into account the differences in our fighting abilities, it would be all but impossible for me to land an attack in a head-on fight.”

“N-no, you came close enough as it was…”

“Not at all. I’m confident in my own skills, of course, but I’m not too proud to admit that yours and Miss Toudou’s are a step above.”

“…” Kirin lowered her eyes, but judging by the fact that she didn’t say anything, she was probably in agreement.

To be honest, Ayato had to agree with her, too.

“But that doesn’t mean I’m out of options. Let’s say, for example, that out of those four attacks, Ayato’s defenses were a little slower responding to the one from below. So maybe I could try changing the trajectory of the attack, taking his movements into consideration. I could see what happens if I were to try to attack with a clockwise rotation… But oh, what a shame. Ayato has managed to parry it wonderfully. So let’s try a counterclockwise rotation, perhaps? This time, he manages to parry it again, but maybe he’s had to shift his stance a little. So I would keep that in mind for the next test. Do you understand? I ended up using six seconds just to get this far, but I still haven’t been able to land a single blow. In this kind of situation, no matter how much stock I have, it wouldn’t be enough.” Claudia stopped there, letting out a tired sigh.

“…So it doesn’t work against stronger opponents?” Saya asked.

“It isn’t that it doesn’t work, it’s just a very inefficient use of the stock. The best exception would be when countering, as my opponent’s actions would be rather limited, so I would be more likely to find a successful approach. But if my opponent knows about my ability, they would no doubt be on guard against that. Moreover, there’s nothing I can do about projectile or long-range attacks.” Claudia forced a smile. “That being said, I can’t deny that precognition is a very powerful ability. As you all no doubt realized when you watched the video, it’s particularly useful for defensive purposes. After all, I would already know how my opponent is

planning to attack before they do it."

"I guess that would still work no matter how much higher they are in rank."

"Yes. But there are exceptions. I can't respond to area attacks like Erenshkigal's, and it isn't well suited to dealing with consecutive attacks like Miss Toudou's Linked Cranes, as the stock would end up getting depleted too rapidly. And even if I can see it coming, I can't evade an attack that's moving faster than my own physical ability to dodge it. So I *can* be defeated."

Ayato remembered when Claudia and Kirin had debated who was the stronger of the two.

They had agreed to disagree, but Claudia's explanation seemed to settle it. If the only thing that mattered was their respective fighting techniques, Kirin would no doubt come out on top, but with the Pan-Dora's precognition, her attacks could end up being unsuccessful. It would probably come down to how much of her stock Claudia was willing to use for the fight.

"That's everything that there is to know about the Pan-Dora's abilities. You can probably see why I would prefer to focus on the Gryps rather than, say, the Lindvolus."

Julis nodded. "If that's how the Pan-Dora works, then a one-on-one tournament would be out of the question. If you were to be matched up against a stronger opponent, you would end up using too much of your stock, even if you did win. But in a team battle, there's no need to go up against a stronger opponent by yourself. And if you're the team leader, the likelihood of being defeated will be pretty low, I guess."

"Precisely. If the team leader's school crest is destroyed, the match is over, even if the other team members are still standing. Or if you look at it the other way, only the team leader needs to be defeated. That's why it's so common for matches to take unexpected turns."

"…So everyone will gang up against the leader?" Saya asked plainly.

"That would depend on each team's strategy, of course," Claudia answered with a broad grin. "It would certainly be fastest to try to take out the leader as quickly as possible, but it can also work to one's advantage to gain a numerical advantage by defeating the opposing team members one by one… Oh, and by the way, because team leader and team representative are separate roles, the

current regulations allow teams to change their leader with each match. Some teams' strategies might involve changing the leader based on the strengths of their opposing team."

"…Hmm. There's no denying that your skills are good for defense, but I've heard that lately the team leader tends to be whoever is in charge of logistical support."

"The vanguard always faces the highest risks. But let's put that aside for a moment." Claudia stopped there, turning to Ayato. "It's not only my Pan-Dora that we need to talk about."

"…Huh?"

"Ayato, we need to know about the Ser Veresta in detail. It does seem to be rather unstable."

"Ah… Well, the thing is…"

Claudia's barb stung, but seeing as he had yet to master the Orga Lux, he couldn't exactly deny it.

"To begin with, it burned right through the Gravisheath's abilities in your battle against Lamilexia. It would be good if you could use that at will, but with the situation being as it is…"

"Even I don't really know how I did that…"

The Ser Veresta had the power to burn through anything. The abilities of Stregas and Dantes, and even of other Orga Luxes, were no exception.

However, when it came to actually cutting through an opponent's abilities, he tended to only be able to do it at the very last moment. That had certainly been the case with Lamilexia's gravity manipulation. He wasn't sure whether he would be able to do it on call.

"I wasn't thinking when I did it. I was focusing only on the battle. And it felt more like it was the Ser Veresta lending me its power than the other way around."

"Oh? I see. So that one has a will of its own, too."

"Basically, it's always testing me," Ayato said, shrugging his shoulders.

Even though he hadn't had to break his seal the first time he had activated it, ever since then, he had only been able to do so when channeling his full power. It seemed that the Orga Lux kept on raising new hurdles in front of him, as if it were subjecting him to a Spartan-like training regimen. He could all but imagine its voice. *"You've come this far—let's see how you fare with this."*

"And you still can't shrink it down like you did in the final of

the Phoenix without Julis's help, can you?"

"Ugh…"

"It looks that way. He's not very good at carefully adjusting his prana," Julis answered for him.

Indeed, even though he had attempted it several times since then, he hadn't been able to pull it off by himself.

"If you need Julis's help to do it, you'll both end up leaving yourselves too open. I don't think we'd be able to incorporate that into our tactics. So, at the very least, I want you to be able to do it by yourself."

"…I'll do my best," Ayato answered.

Claudia smiled, lightly clapping her hands. "Well then, there's no point just talking about it. Seeing as Ayato has gone to the trouble of breaking his seal, why don't we begin with some practical training?"

*

Ayato and the others, having split into two groups, stood facing off against one another in the center of the training room.

"Now then, since I'm the only one among us who has experience with team battles, allow me to explain. The Gryps is a team competition, and as you all know, each team must be composed of five members. However, it's extremely rare for team members to be in perfect coordination. Training, of course, takes time, but that isn't always effective… Ah, but Gallardworth would be an exception on that count, I suppose. After all, that's what they specialize in." Claudia was standing directly in front of Ayato, holding the Pan-Dora ready.

Kirin, likewise, standing at Ayato's side, was holding the Senbakiri in front of her, following Claudia's explanation carefully.

"Well, all it takes is one Strega or Dante, or even an Orga Lux wielder, to turn a match around," Julis added, her arms crossed.

There was no mistaking that acting independently could be more effective in certain situations, such as when dealing with abilities that acted over a wide area.

Claudia nodded. "Yes, but it isn't all that common for all five members to fight separately. If one person were to go off on their own, the other team would probably group up against them. No, depending on the situation, strategies for the Gryps usually involve

employing a vanguard of two or three members fighting in unison. And we won't be able to do that unless we're able to coordinate with one another."

"…In other words, the Gryps is essentially just an extension of the Phoenix?" Saya asked, standing a little apart from the others. She looked mildly bored.

"Exactly. We have to first learn to fight alongside one another individually as tag-team partners, and then we can build on that to put together a number of coordination patterns involving three or more of us at any one time. Of course, we could try to reduce the training time by selecting only one of us to be in charge of those coordination patterns…"

"No," Kirin interrupted. "That would be too much of a risk if something were to go wrong during the tournament."

Ayato was of the same opinion. They would be far better off if they could respond to a wider range of possibilities, even if it meant they would need to spend more time training.

"In that case, let's spend the next three months, up until the end of the school year, getting used to fighting in pairs. Depending on how things stand, we can start practicing as a team after that. But that said…" Claudia paused with a light smile before beginning to channel her prana throughout her body. "I would like to have a little practice bout. What do you say?"

Claudia separated them into two tag teams, setting Ayato and Kirin against Julis and herself. Since Ayato was already used to fighting alongside both Julis and Saya, and given that the situation was the same between Saya and Kirin, the grouping seemed reasonable enough. Saya had picked the short straw and would have to sit the practice match out.

"Let's do our best, Kirin!"

"Y-yes!" Kirin answered nervously.

Not only was this her first time with Ayato as her tag-team partner, but she was also the team leader.

Both groups had selected their leaders based on what they might expect to happen in the Gryps. Kirin was the leader of their team, and the opposition's was Claudia.

Claudia let out a soft laugh. "Let's see what they can do, Julis."

"You don't need to remind me. We don't get to try this very often. Do you mind if I use *that*?"

"Of course not. We should be able to get some good battle data

from it.”

Julis and Claudia whispered back and forth with each other for a long moment, no doubt deciding on their strategy. When they were finally ready, Julis took a step back.

“*Team A versus Team B, practice match—begin!*”

Given that it was only a practice match, they had left the team names as the defaults, so their school crests opened the match with an unusually bland starting cue.

Ayato exchanged looks with Kirin, and the two of them advanced toward Claudia from either side.

Since Claudia was both the leader and the vanguard, it made sense to ignore Julis and go straight for her.

“Haah!”

“Yah!”

Ayato attacked from the left, just as Kirin moved in from the right.

“My, my…!”

Claudia met both attacks with the twin blades of the Pan-Dora, her expression grim. It couldn’t have been easy blocking not only Kirin’s Senbakiri but also Ayato’s attack, with only one hand to each. And of course, Ayato’s weapon was the Ser Veresta. Though they were both Orga Luxes, there was no mistaking that the Ser Veresta was gradually pushing the Pan-Dora back.

“This is…harder than I thought!” Claudia exhaled, before relaxing all of a sudden and twisting out of the way, a parry to Ayato’s attack.

But at that moment, Kirin flowed straight into her next strike.

“Ugh…!”

Claudia managed to repel her, but the effort left her completely open.

Ayato was about to cut straight through the school crest on her blouse with the Ser Veresta when—

“!”

—he sensed a sudden foreboding and leaped back just in time to dodge the three blades of light that thrust down into the ground where he’d been standing.

“A-Ayato! That’s…!” Kirin, having dodged a similar attack, stood wide-eyed in shock.

“Phew… You took your time, Julis. I’m no match for the two of them together, not without using the precognition. I’m afraid I can’t afford to waste it on a practice battle, but it looks like I wouldn’t even last ten seconds without it.”

“Sorry. It looks like I can’t control all six of them together yet,” Julis said, the blades of light that had struck the ground rising into the air.

Ayato had thought at first that it was one of Julis’s abilities, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“Don’t tell me that’s the Aspera Spina…?”

The three blades hovering in the air, as if being manipulated by invisible threads—no, the *six* blades, counting the three that had attacked Kirin—looked just like Julis’s rapier-like Lux, the Aspera Spina. But—

“No. This is the Nova Spina, my new sword.” Julis grinned, brandishing a seventh blade in front of her.

“Is this the new Lux model you mentioned?” Saya, who until then had been watching the match in silence, seemed uncharacteristically interested in it.

“Yes. This is one of the new Lux models jointly developed between Seidoukan and Allekant, a Rect Lux.”

“A Rect Lux…”

“The rapier that Julis is holding is like the mother, capable of controlling numerous children. You need to be highly skilled at processing spatial information to use it, though,” Claudia explained, taking care to put some distance between her and her opponents.

“I see… It looks impressive, but I don’t think it’s well suited to you, Julis,” Ayato said, glancing toward Kirin.

Kirin seemed to pick up on what he meant. It might have been their first time fighting alongside each other as a tag team, but the both of them being sword users, there were certain things that could be left unsaid.

Kirin was still holding the Senbakiri toward Claudia, but she wasn’t letting down her guard toward Julis, either. She might have been taken by surprise the first time, but now that she knew what to expect, she would no doubt have little difficulty meeting the next attack. In that case, Ayato would be free to focus on the team’s leader.

“Oh? What is that supposed to mean, Ayato?”

“Just what I said. You already have countless long-range

techniques at your disposal, even without weapons. I guess it just doesn't seem all that original."

Perhaps he had said it a little too provocatively, but those were his honest impressions. Gaining a new technique that was similar to those one already had didn't provide much of an advantage.

Julis, however, broke into a dangerous grin before shaking her head. "You don't understand, do you? Well, I guess I'll just have to show you, won't I?"

And with that, she leaped ferociously toward Kirin.

"Ah?!" Kirin exclaimed in surprise.

She can't mean to engage her in close combat…?

Ayato, too, was taken aback.

Thanks to her training with Ayato and the experience she'd gained fighting through the Phoenix, Julis's skills at close-range combat had increased dramatically over the past few months. At first, she'd barely been able to follow Ayato's movements, but at her current level, she would probably be able to respond to them, at the very least.

But even so, she still wasn't an even match for either him or Kirin. Claudia had judged her own close-range combat abilities as being one step behind those of Ayato and Kirin, so going by that logic, Julis would have to be lagging by at least three steps.

Be that as it may, Kirin was his team leader. He couldn't afford to let Julis reach her.

"Oh, I don't think so!"

Claudia appeared out of nowhere, stopping Ayato from putting himself between Kirin and Julis with a perfectly angled slash.

"—?!"

He managed to dodge the strike, but Claudia continued to lunge out with one attack after another.

He didn't need to cross swords with her to see there was no particular form to her fighting style. Rather, she seemed to be employing a wholly unique mode of fighting that deviated from the established styles she had previously learned.

Ayato might have had the edge in techniques, but Claudia's twin swords were managing to outmaneuver him by the raw number of attacks. She might not have been able to land a strike on him, but she was certainly making it difficult to counterattack.

"This is her debut, Ayato. Do try not to get in the way."

At that moment, Julis leaped within Kirin's reach.

Though clearly surprised, Kirin readied herself to meet the attack.

"I'm coming, Kirin!" Julis cried, aiming her rapier straight for her opponent's school crest.

But just before the blade could reach her blouse, Kirin deftly brushed it aside, without so much as breaking a sweat.

Right, that kind of move won't work against Kirin.

In one uninterrupted stroke, Kirin followed through with her counterattack, slicing clean through Julis's school crest. Or so it looked.

But it seemed that the attack had been stopped with just a fraction of an inch to spare by one of Julis's remote terminals.

"…It's not over yet!"

Kirin didn't wait before continuing into her next move. She sliced first upward from below, then downward from the right, then directly from the front. It was a perfect sequence of consecutive attacks, the sum of all Kirin's techniques boiled down into one move—the Toudou School's ultimate technique, the Linked Cranes. Even Ayato couldn't defeat it.

"…Impressive!" Julis gasped. She was using all six of her

remote terminals to defend against the onslaught.

"How…?"

The Linked Cranes wasn't the kind of technique that could be parried by sheer numerical advantage alone. Ayato knew that from experience. Julis was somehow responding to the unbelievable speed of Kirin's attack.

"Hee-hee-hee… Do you understand now, Ayato?" Claudia laughed, her swords locking against his. "The best thing about these Rect Luxes is their speed."

Claudia's feints managed to check Ayato's movements, all without getting close enough for him to counter.

If they were to engage seriously head-on, Ayato would probably win, but if she were to keep feinting, there wasn't much difference in their respective levels of ability.

"Normally, Julis wouldn't stand a chance against Kirin in close combat. Their physical characteristics and training are too different, after all. Even if she wanted to block against Miss Toudou's attacks, she wouldn't be physically up to the task…"

"…!" Ayato suddenly realized what Claudia meant.

"That's right. Rect Luxes are controlled by the user's mind, not their body. Which means that she's able to respond much quicker than with a traditional Lux."

"…I see. I guess I should take back what I said a minute ago!" Ayato pushed back against Claudia, taking advantage of her momentary surprise to put some distance between them.

He glanced back toward Kirin. She had likewise separated from Julis.

"Phew… I wasn't expecting that. To think that you would be able to defend against the Linked Cranes…"

"Kirin!" Ayato called out. It would probably be best for them to pull back and revise their strategy.

Kirin, however, gave him only a brief glance, an embarrassed smile rising on her lips. "U-um, Ayato! Could you just stay there for a minute and watch?"

"Huh?"

He had no time to argue before she fixed her breathing, preparing to launch another attack against Julis.

"Oh? Let's see what you can do!"

"Here I come!"

The Senbakiri glistened as it carved a perfect arc through the

air.

Julis blocked it again with one of the remote terminals.

Kirin, however, continued on to her next move without pausing.

“Here goes!”

“What?!”

Just when he thought Julis had blocked the attack yet again, Ayato saw that Kirin’s wrist was twisted in the opposite direction. She must have changed the flow of prana.

The terminal that had blocked the Senbakiri was unable to withstand the impact and swung through the air, off-balance.

If it were just an unbalancing technique, Julis might have been able to respond to it. But then the off-center blade came into contact with one of the others. As Kirin drove in another attack, the two blades began to interfere with each other. All six were suddenly flung across the room.

“Wh-what?!”

Given that each of the remote terminals were controlled by thought, it would probably be difficult to keep them under control if their movements were thrown off simultaneously by one’s opponent.

“This is it!”

Kirin wouldn’t let this opportunity fly by.

The Senbakiri flashed toward Julis’s exposed school crest.

But just when Ayato thought the match was settled, a dark shadow appeared between the two.

“Phew… That was close.” There, having blocked Kirin’s attack with her twin swords, was Claudia.

“No…!” Ayato cried out. It had been his job to keep her in check, but in the brief instant in which he had turned his attention to Kirin’s attack, she had slipped right past him and inserted herself into the battle.

“Sorry, Claudia.”

“It’s nothing to worry about.”

“I—I know that!” Julis snapped as she brought the six remote terminals under control, surrounding Kirin in a pincer formation.

“Blossom—*Semiserrata!*”

A magic circle appeared above Kirin, a huge flame gracefully unfurling its petals

A trap?! When did she set…?

“Argh…!”

Even with her exceptional reflexes, Kirin barely managed to avoid the descending flames.

But just before Ayato could leap to her defense—

"Checkmate." Claudia, one step ahead of him, sliced clean through her school crest with the Pan-Dora.

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"I-I'm so sorry, Ayato! I shouldn't have told you to hold back…"

"No, I should be the one apologizing. It was my job to keep Claudia busy… Sorry!"

With the practice battle over, Ayato and Kirin stood bowing their heads to each other in shame.

"Now, now, you two. It was only a practice bout. And besides, the way you two were working together, it's hard to imagine that it was your first time as a tag team," Claudia said.

"No, I should say the same for you. Maybe I should have expected as much from old friends," Ayato replied.

Julis frowned. "It isn't like we had some kind of advantage just because we knew each other as kids. I just left most of the coordination to Claudia."

"Indeed. I think I have a good grasp of everyone's battle styles, so I should be able to put them together into a strategy." Claudia spoke casually, but judging by her performance in the practice match, Ayato had no doubt that she was telling the truth.

"…By the way, Julis… Based on that fixed ability, can that new Lux transmit prana?"

"Oh, that's Saya for you. So you noticed?" Julis nodded toward Saya, who was staring intently at the Rect Lux.

"Um, what do you mean?"

Ayato hadn't even noticed Julis laying the trap, but maybe that had something to do with it, he thought.

"This Rect Lux is able to spread my prana into the remote terminals. As you all know, normally fixed abilities require a lot of advance preparation, but with these terminals, I can lay them all much quicker."

"That's…impressive."

If that was true, they should be able to employ a much wider range of tactics in battle.

Moreover, the Rect Lux seemed to be able to compensate for

Julis's relative weakness at close-range combat, so its most pronounced effects would no doubt be on her own skills.

"Hmph… Why does only Julis get a power-up?" Saya puffed out her cheeks, her gaze still fixed on the weapon.

"I don't think that's it," Ayato muttered.

"Huh?" Saya finally raised her face. "What do you mean?"

"It might not be a power-up, exactly, but I think Kirin's skills have definitely improved."

"Wha—?" Kirin's body trembled, perhaps taken by surprise at the sudden praise.

"That technique you used to break through Julis's defenses… It was the *Reverse Rakshasa*, wasn't it?"

"N-no, it's less like using and more like copying, I'd say… I was so impressed when I saw you use it during the tournament, so I practiced it in secret… I tried to use it in Lieseltania, and it seemed to work okay… B-but I'm still not very good at it…! Um…I wanted to show you, though…" Kirin trailed off incoherently, her face having turned scarlet.

The *Reverse Rakshasa* was one of the Amagiri Shinmei style's Master Techniques and especially effective at taking advantage of the flow of attacks by multiple opponents to turn them back against their users. Ayato was of course surprised that she could have learned the technique just by watching him and practicing it by herself, but what was even more astonishing was that executing it normally required the user to be in the state of *shiki*.

That was the kind of skill that was impossible to learn in any short length of time, but based on what he had just seen, Kirin didn't seem to have even needed it. Which meant that she had learned the *Reverse Rakshasa* purely as a fighting technique.

That's almost too *impressive…*

Ayato had long suspected that Kirin might one day surpass him in swordsmanship, but he couldn't help but wonder whether she already had.

"…Hmm. I need a power-up, too."

"My, my, you seem very eager, Miss Sasamiya."

"I won't be of any use to Ayato if I'm left behind," Saya replied, activating one of her Luxes. "…I'll participate in the next one."

Claudia let out a small laugh. "Hee-hee. In that case, shall we decide on the teams?"

The five of them continued training day after day, until Ayato found himself advancing into second year at Seidoukan Academy.

CHAPTER 3
SCHOOL FAIR RHAPSODY I

Throughout the room deep in the Hall of the Yellow Dragon at the Jie Long Seventh Intitute…

"I can't agree!"

…Hufeng Zhao's enraged voice echoed.

"Why do we have to team up with them?!"

Sitting at the place of honor at the head of the beautifully crafted rosewood table, her feet dangling over the edge of her chair, was Hufeng's master, Xinglou Fan, calmly ignoring his ardent protestations.

The twins, Shenyun Li and Shenhua Li, stood behind her solemnly.

"Hufeng, are you unhappy with my decision?"

"Of course I am!" Hufeng bellowed without the slightest hesitation.

"…You've become quite direct, haven't you?" Xinglou murmured, though she seemed more impressed than angry.

When Hufeng had first become Xinglou's disciple, he had perhaps been too humble, often finding himself unable to voice his concerns about anything that his master might say. But now that his abilities had been recognized and he was in a position to unify the Wood sect—all while also serving as Xinglou's personal secretary—that humility had vanished without a trace.

Having to deal with Xinglou's unprecedented behavior twenty-four seven, he could no longer afford to be modest or nervous. Of course, he still paid her every respect as his master, but that was a different matter.

“Well, I don’t particularly mind,” interjected the person sitting next to him, a woman named Cecily Wong.

Her long, wavy hair was light brown in color, and she had well-proportioned, sculpted features. Cecily already stood out in Jie Long, where the majority of students came from countries around Asia, but on top of that, she was the *daoshi* who led the Water sect; Xinglou’s second-most-high-ranking disciple; the fourth-ranked student at the institute; *and* had been given the alias the Flower of a Thousand Thunderbolts, Raigeki Senka. To Hufeng, she was of course his superior in the order of Xinglou’s students, but the pair had a friendship that went back much further than that. They had even reached the semifinals of the last Phoenix as tag-team partners.

“When it comes to conjuring tricks and illusions, at least, these two are much better than I am. Don’t you think it’s best to have the strongest people on our team?”

“You’re not thinking this through, Cecily. Just because someone’s strong doesn’t mean they’ll be a good team member. And with three *daoshi*—no, *four* counting Elder Brother—the team would be unbalanced.”

Cecily hadn’t changed. She still didn’t look at the big picture and hated having to consider problems. She was the kind of person who would prefer to completely purge a messy room rather than tidy it up properly.

Well, not exactly, he corrected himself. She wouldn’t purge it herself. She would get someone else—probably him—to do it for her.

“Oh? So that’s it, Hufeng. Are you upset that no one from the Wood sect was selected? I see, I see. Well, why don’t you just come out and say it? You’re too cute,” she said with a sickly sweet smile, pulling him toward her plentiful bosom and stroking his head gently.

“Wha—?! C-cut it out, Cecily!” Hufeng, having turned scarlet, tried to break free, but Cecily, being a *daoshi*, was too strong for him.

“It’s okay, Hufeng. You know that I’m pretty good at martial arts, too, right?”

“I—I know! That’s not what I was trying to say! Let me go already!”

Cecily wasn’t a bad person by any means, but Hufeng couldn’t

stand the way she enjoyed treating him like a child.

"You're as close as ever, I see." Xinglou smiled innocently.

At that moment, the door behind her swung open, and a tall man strode into the room.

"…Sorry to keep you waiting."

He had quick eyes, a sharp-looking face, and a body that even beneath his clothes was obviously well honed. The way he carried himself, he gave off a dangerous aura, his bearing leaving not so much as a single opening or weakness.

"Th-this is Elder Brother—!" Hufeng leaped to his feet, attempting to introduce him with the customary bow.

"…There's no need for that. Sit."

Hufeng, overawed by the piercing glint in the man's eyes, could do only as he was told.

Xiaohui Wu.

The Jie Long Seventh Institute's second-ranked student, also known as the Celestial Warrior, Hagun Seikun. He was Xinglou's first disciple, having accompanied her when she first came to Jie Long, and in abilities, he surpassed both Hufeng in martial arts and Cecily in Seisenjutsu.

Xiaohui usually secluded himself deep within the Hall of the Yellow Dragon and only rarely appeared in public. It had been quite a while since Hufeng had either seen or spoken with him directly. It was rumored that he was the only person whom Xinglou let train with her, but neither Hufeng nor Cecily could know whether that was true.

Xiaohui stood in front of the table, slowly putting down the tray he had been holding in his hands. There seemed to be a set of Chinese tea implements arranged on it.

"U-um, Elder Brother…?" Hufeng called out to him in bewilderment.

"…"

Xiaohui, however, without even glancing in his direction, merely motioned for him to be silent. He was focusing only on the tea implements in front of him. With a practiced yet deliberate hand, he poured hot water into a glass steeper. The dried leaves danced around softly as they unfurled into bloom.

They waited in silence until Xiaohui gave a slight nod. After that, tea was poured into cups and passed along to everyone assembled.

With that done, Xiaohui sat in the seat opposite Hufeng and sipped at his tea. "…Hmm." He nodded. His face showed no expression, but he seemed satisfied.

Hufeng, at first taken aback, finally returned to his senses. "Wh-what are you doing, Elder Brother?" he cried out, jumping to his feet. "You should let someone else worry about serving tea! I'll do it!"

"No. If our master wishes it—"

"Master!" Hufeng swung his gaze around sternly.

But Xinglou was drinking from her own cup with complete composure. "Hmm?"

"How can you give that kind of task to him?!"

"Xiaohui's tea is the best." She laughed merrily.

"Well, there's no denying that." Cecily, sitting at Hufeng's side, didn't seem to mind, either.

"Stop complaining and try it," Xinglou said.

"B-but…"

"Just try it."

"O-okay…"

As instructed, Hufeng timidly lifted the cup to his lips.

"—!"

A rich, mellow fragrance wafted into his nose. Hufeng didn't know much about tea, but this was a refreshing, invigorating aroma that he had never experienced before.

"I-it certainly is delicious…"

"…Hmm." Xiaohui nodded, seemingly pleased.

"You two, how long do you intend to stay like that?"

"A-ah…"

"Um…"

Shenyun and Shenhua murmured vaguely to themselves in unison, before cautiously taking their seats.

The twins weren't acquainted with Xiaohui, so his performance had probably left them taken aback, too, Hufeng thought, feeling the slightest bit closer to them.

"Now then, allow me to announce it once more. Out of all my disciples, I've selected the five of you to participate in the upcoming Gryps. Don't disappoint me." Xinglou's tone of voice was as light as ever, but there was a forcefulness lying beneath it that went beyond words.

Everyone except Hufeng immediately placed their right fist in

their left palm as a gesture of obeisance.

"…Understood. I have no further complaints." Hufeng, resigning himself, adopted the same pose as the others. "But can I at least ask why you want to add the twins to the team?"

"Why, to compensate for everyone's weaknesses, of course."

"Weaknesses? What weaknesses?"

"You and Cecily are both too honest. The team will need people who are able to do what has to be done."

"…I see."

Hufeng couldn't argue with that. He was well aware that he preferred to engage his opponents head-on, and Cecily's fighting style both began and ended with brute force. He couldn't really say that either of them excelled at cunning strategy like the twins did.

Hufeng suddenly realized that Xinglou had left someone out.

"Master, what about Elder Brother?"

"Hmm? Ah, don't worry about him."

"Okay…"

"Oh-ho! In that case, don't neglect your training, everyone." Xinglou nodded cheerfully, springing down from her seat. "It's time for me to be going."

"You're going out…? Don't tell me you're planning to—"

"Yes. It isn't long before the main act. I have to finish my own preparations, too."

Behind his words, Hufeng had been trying to advise her to give it up, but Xinglou didn't seem interested in listening.

"Preparations?" Cecily repeated. "Does she mean for the school fair?"

"Indeed. This is unheard of…" Hufeng sighed, resting his head in his hands.

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It was said that spring was the season during which students at Asterisk were at their most lively.

Of course, many students at Asterisk aspired to distinguish themselves at the Festa, but at the same time, the number of those who had given up on their dreams and decided to enjoy their youth was not at all inconsiderable. For such students, the school fair held each spring was a cause for celebration greater even than the Festa itself.

Or so explained Eishirou.

Ayato nodded, genuinely impressed. “Wow… I see. So that’s why it’s so lively, huh?”

Outside the classroom window, an army of students was taking advantage of lunch break to set up a small town of stages and stalls. The fair was due to open in two days’ time, so they were putting all their effort into this last burst before the finish line.

“Lectures by famous graduates, presentations from all the clubs, competitions between schools, parades, theater performances, you name it. This kind of thing will be running nonstop throughout the whole city.”

“But aren’t school fairs a Japanese tradition?”

“Ah, well, at first only Seidoukan did it,” Eishirou explained between bites of his melon bun. “But now everyone’s gotten in on it. And besides, next to the Festa, the school fair is the city’s biggest draw for tourists.”

Since there were no class changes at Seidoukan, they had all advanced into second year with the same classmates and homeroom teacher. The only thing that seemed to have changed at all was their seats. Ayato couldn’t help but feel a little strange having Eishirou sitting behind him now.

“After all, it’s the only time of year when all six schools open their campuses to the general public. People can only really have a peek at them now, so of course they’re going to be popular.”

“I guess that means that we can go to the other schools too, then, right?”

“Ah… But it’s just the grounds and some of the buildings that are open, you know. If you try to wander off, your little friend there will give you quite a warning,” Eishirou said, pointing toward the school crest on Ayato’s chest. “Nonstudents are all given similar crests when they arrive, for the same reason. And the punishments for not wearing them or for dueling are a lot more intense during the fair. You should be careful.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

Ayato had already heard countless warnings from the academy on that point.

“Well then, I’d better be getting back to work.” Having finished his lunch, Eishirou licked his fingers before jumping down from the desk that he had been sitting on.

“Work? Now? What about the afternoon classes?”

“We’re nearing the last act, Ayato. This will be the biggest event in all our club’s history, you know.”

Eishirou’s hands had been so full over the past few days with his event for the school fair that he hadn’t even returned to the dormitory to sleep.

And what was more, the event wasn’t even being held at Seidoukan.

The school fair extended out of each of the six schools and into Asterisk’s urban area. It seemed that the event that Eishirou’s newspaper club was working on was going to be held there.

Whatever it was, it seemed that Seidoukan, Allekant, and Jie Long were jointly in charge of organizing it, while publicity and advertising were being handled by each school’s journalism club, like Eishirou’s.

“It’s pretty rare for events to be held in the city, you know, and not to mention organized by three schools. It’ll be a big deal, so look forward to it!”

“That’s all well and good, but I don’t suppose you could tell me what it’s actually about?”

It sounded like the kind of event that required participants, but Eishirou still hadn’t given him any details.

“It’ll be more interesting to find out day of, I think.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You weren’t entered into it without any notice.” Ayato forced a smile as he glanced at his friend with a slightly reproving gaze.

Eishirou broke into a wide grin. “Heh-heh, I should be thanking you, huh? Just putting the name of the winner of the Phoenix on it will make this thing more popular than you can imagine.”

Ayato had only let Eishirou associate his name with whatever the event was because his friend had seemed so desperate, but he was starting to get worried. He hadn’t thought it would be on such a large scale.

“But are you sure it’s okay? Like I told you earlier, I have some other plans, too. I can’t promise that I’ll be able to do it.”

He owed Eishirou a lot, so he wanted to help him if he could, but he was worried that might be difficult depending on what exactly he wanted.

“Come on, Ayato, can’t you do something? I’m begging you!” Eishirou put his hands together with a loud clap, his head bowed as if in prayer.

But his friend's affected mannerism only put him more ill at ease. "Anyway," he began, trying to change the subject. "You're pretty passionate about it. You can't tell me why?"

Eishirou was always highly motivated when it came to the newspaper club, and there was no denying that this seemed to be a major event—but still, it wasn't normal just how much he was putting himself into it.

"Ah, well… To be honest, it's the club prez who's so ardent about it, not me. She's the one who was contacted by the Society for the Study of Meteoric Engineering to get the newspaper club involved."

"The club president? You mean that girl with the bob cut?"

He couldn't really remember her face, but he was sure that he had seen her once in an air-window somewhere.

"Yeah. The prez is graduating this year, so she wants to end everything with a big fireworks show. And so I, her faithful servant, am doing everything in my power to help." Eishirou might have been trying to hide his true feelings with his jokes, but he couldn't stop a blush of embarrassment from rising to his cheeks.

This was the first time that Ayato had seen that side of him.

Perhaps because Ayato had guessed his true motives, Eishirou's expression suddenly turned desperate. "Ah, so that's how it is," he began, scratching at his head with his fingernails. "I'm kind of in the prez's debt, so if I can't pay it back, she'll come for me in my dreams, I'm telling you! So please, Amagiri!"

"I mean, I do want to help, it's just…" Ayato was taken by surprise at Eishirou's charitable side, but he still couldn't break his other promise.

"Well, why don't you tell me what this previous engagement of yours is…?"

"Wha—?! Uh, you know…"

His "previous engagement," as Eishirou had put it, was with the famous songstress Sylvia Lyyneheym.

To thank her for her help in rescuing Flora, he had agreed to go on a date with her during the school fair.

He hadn't heard anything from her since the beginning of the year, so he'd been starting to think it had all been some kind of joke, until—

"Hey, Ayato? So, about the school fair, sorry for keeping you waiting. It took a bit longer than I thought it would to arrange some time

off. Anyway, I've managed to schedule in a holiday, so let's spend these three days together, okay?"

So said Sylvia the other day, having called him from out of the blue.

…But he couldn't tell Eishirou that.

"A-anyway, I'll try to talk it over with them. But I might not be able to confirm anything until the last minute."

He would be spending three days with Sylvia, but he hadn't heard from her what they would be doing over that time. Seeing as Ayato hadn't been able to contact her since that call, she was probably overworking herself in the days leading up to the fair just to be able to take that break.

She had told him when and where to meet, so maybe she'd known that she wouldn't be able to contact him again until the fair.

"Okay, that's fine. I'm counting on you!" Eishirou said, before changing the topic. "By the way, your team will be taking a break from training, right?"

"Ah yeah. Julis wants to keep on going by herself, though…"

Claudia had her own responsibilities as student council president, and it seemed that she would be busy during the school fair keeping everything in order. Julis, in contrast, didn't have the slightest interest in it and was planning to seclude herself in their training room until everything was over with.

"Heh, that's the princess for you," Eishirou said, glancing toward Julis, who had just returned to her seat after buying a bread roll for lunch.

Julis glared right back at him. "What? Do you have a problem with that, Yabuki?"

"N-no, nothing like that…," Eishirou muttered, looking away from her intense gaze and pulling a pained face. "Hey," he began in a low voice, ducking near. "Doesn't the princess seem like she's in a bad mood?"

"Yeah," Ayato whispered back. "She's been like this a lot lately…"

"Hmph!" Julis snorted from across the room, turning away from the both of them.

From the seat next to her, even Saya was glaring at the two boys reproachfully. Or rather, her expression was as usual, but her anger was strong enough that it seemed to waft over through the air alone.

"…Do you really have no idea what's wrong, Amagiri?"

"Not a clue…"

At that instant, the bell rang, announcing the end of lunch break.

"Damn, looks like I've stayed longer than I should have. See you around!" Eishirou said, casually heading off toward the door.

"Hey, wait! Yabuki! What about the afternoon classes?" Ayato called out.

"It's fine," Eishirou said, looking back with a wave. "They're too boring anyway. It won't make any difference whether I stay or go."

But just as he was about to leave the classroom, he bumped into a short woman coming through the door. "Ah, sorry, my bad," he muttered. "I should have been looking…" His voice trailed off, his face turning pale.

"Oh, don't worry about *that*. But you were in the middle of something, Yabuki. You think my classes are boring, huh, is that it? Well?" Kyouko Yatsuzaki, the students' homeroom teacher, held up her nail bat.

"No, I mean, how do I put it…?! Th-that's not what I meant! Y-you're taking this the wrong way, little Kyouko! Just give me a chance to—"

Ayato only had a moment to shut his eyes before a painful striking sound echoed throughout the room.

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The Seidoukan Academy promenade.

The opening day of the school fair was blessed with blue skies and warm weather. Sunlight was sparkling through the canopy of fresh green leaves that overhung the long pedestrian avenue leading into Seidoukan Academy.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons why the grounds were teeming with students and visitors alike. The promenade was quite a distance from the main facilities, and there were no stages or stalls to be seen, but even so, once Ayato sat down on the bench and began watching the flow of passersby, there was no end to their comings and goings.

Even so, perhaps because it was still quieter than the scene at the academy's main gate, he found himself able to relax.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Ayato!"

Lifting his gaze at the sound of his name, he noticed a young woman wearing a large-brimmed hat standing in front of him.

“N-no, you’re right on time. Though I’m surprised you knew about this place, Sylvie.”

It was the girl—Sylvia—who had chosen this bench as their meeting place.

There would have been no reason to be so surprised were she a student at Seidoukan, but Sylvia went to Queenvale. Ayato couldn’t help but be impressed by her knowledge of the campus.

“I’ve come here a few times before, during other school fairs. And besides, it’s too busy by the main entrance,” Sylvia said with a weak shudder.

There was no doubting that she was exceptionally skilled at hiding her identity, but in a crowded place like that, there was still a chance that someone might recognize her.

“I actually wanted to dress a bit more stylishly…but then I’d probably stand out too much.”

She was wearing jeans and a blouse, practically the same kind of outfit she had donned when they’d first met.

“No, it looks good on you.”

She was usually dressed up flamboyantly whenever she appeared on TV or else in her Queenvale uniform. Of course, she looked wonderful in that kind of outfit, too, Ayato thought, but the simple clothing she was wearing now better suited her carefree and buoyant personality.

Sylvia blinked in apparent surprise, before breaking out into a broad smile. “Mm-hmm… You’re forthright, huh? Thanks! It makes me happy to hear you say that.” She leaned forward, drawing her face close to his. “But you know, there might be a problem with yours, don’t you think?”

“Huh?” Ayato’s heart was throbbing. He could measure the inches between their faces. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“Your clothes! I *did* tell you to disguise yourself, but you look way too suspicious!”

“O-oh…”

There was no denying that Ayato, having won the Phoenix, was a celebrity now, too. He would also have to dress in such a way that people wouldn’t recognize him, all the more so if he were to accompany Sylvia.

Which was why he had put on a hat and sunglasses, but it looked like people would be able to see through them right away.

“You weren’t wearing anything special the last time we met, either, but that’s just out of the question,” Sylvia said more sternly than he had expected, eyeing him over with her hands on her hips. “Lucky for you, I came prepared.”

“…You did?”

“Stay there. Let me show you.”

No sooner had she sat next to him than she snatched off his hat and swept back his hair with her hand—all before taking out of her bag something that looked like a thin hairband. She fitted it onto his head.

“Um, what are you doing?”

“It’s what I use. It only works for a short amount of time, but it can change the color of your hair. Well, technically it just makes your hair look a different color, but whatever.”

Ayato couldn’t help but be impressed.

“And let’s get rid of those sunglasses. How about a pair of mock glasses…? Here, what do you think?”

When he glanced toward the compact mirror that Sylvia pulled out of her handbag, it was like staring back at a completely different person.

The most striking change was that his hair had turned blond. And the hairband seemed to have disappeared completely. On top

of that, the mock glasses were much more fashionable than the sunglasses he had been wearing.

He was impressed. There was little chance that any strangers would be able to recognize him now.

"Good. Now that that's out of the way, shall we begin our date?" Sylvia asked, taking Ayato by the arm and pulling him up from his seat.

"…Very well. It would be my pleasure to accompany you."

"I don't want you to accompany me. I want you to *escort* me." Sylvia linked her arm through his, glancing toward him with upturned eyes.

She had taken complete command of the situation.

"I-I'll do my best."

"Good. Well then, how about you start by showing me around?"

Ayato cocked his head in confusion. "That's fine with me… But you don't want to see a performance or go to an event or anything?"

"Hmm… If there's something that you're interested in, I wouldn't mind taking a look. But I'm hoping to see all six of the schools," Sylvia said eagerly, her fists clenched, as they approached the school buildings.

"Wait, you want to go to *all* of them?"

"We can't do it all in one day, of course. But I mean, that's why I took three days off."

In that case, they would probably have to go to at least one other school today in addition to Seidoukan, Ayato thought.

It wasn't afternoon yet, so they would probably be okay as far as time went, but they wouldn't be able to dawdle.

"But if there's an event or something that you want to go to, I don't mind putting that first."

"Ah… Well, there was something that a friend asked me to participate in."

"You mean this one?" Sylvia asked, opening an air-window with a flick of her hand.

A colorful advertisement popped up in front of him. EARTH-SHATTERING! THE GRAN COLOSSEO! The event was scheduled for the last day of the school fair, at the Sirius Dome. All it said was *Participatory Field Simulation Battle!* There was no information at all as to what exactly it was supposed to be about.

"That's you, isn't it?" Sylvia asked, pointing at the top of the list

of contestants.

"*Champion of the Phoenix*… They're not wasting it, huh…?"

"Everyone's talking about it on the Net. I didn't think you were the kind of person to take part in that kind of thing."

"I'm not… One of my friends is helping organize it. I couldn't turn him down… Or I suppose he didn't give me a chance to turn him down."

"I see," Sylvia said, closing the air-window. "So that's it."

They had reached the end of the promenade, and the number of passersby had increased considerably. They were near the back of the middle school building, and while they couldn't go inside, the square in front of them was crowded with rows of food stalls.

"But I'd already arranged to go out with you, so I don't mind turning him down."

"It's okay. I'm a little interested in it myself… Ah, hold on a second!" Sylvia came to a sudden stop.

Her gaze had turned to the food stall beside them. "Mister, can we have two?" she called out.

"Here you go," the vendor replied, holding out a pair of ice creams.

She turned back to Ayato. "For you," she said, offering one to him.

"Thanks. But why ice cream?"

"If you're going to hide your identity on a date, you need ice cream. Well, I guess it's technically gelato, though."

"Heh, so it is."

She seemed to be modeling her behavior on characters from old movies.

"Now then, how about the next one?" boomed a voice from a loudspeaker behind them.

Ayato and Sylvia turned around to see a huge air-window floating in front of the high school building. It looked like a live broadcast from the Sirius Dome.

"Oh, it looks like Miluše and the others are going all out," Sylvia murmured between licks of her ice cream.

"Are they friends of yours?"

"My cute little juniors. Have you heard of Rusalka?"

"Ah, so that's them, is it?" Ayato glanced back at the girls performing in the air-window.

While not as popular as Sylvia, Rusalka was an all-female rock

band with fans throughout the world.

He couldn't pinpoint when, but he was sure that he had heard that song somewhere before.

"Right, I heard that they're planning on taking part in the Gryps."

"That must be part of Petra's publicity strategy. They made their debut at the last Gryps, you know… Ah, Petra is Queenvale's chairwoman and my producer. Rusalka's, too. She can be pretty devious, you know, but she knows how to get results."

"Oh…"

For a brief instant, Claudia's face seemed to float up before him. Perhaps people in charge of others were all like that.

"You'll be participating in the Gryps too, won't you, Ayato? With your friends? You should be careful. Rusalka is pretty good. I mean, they can get a bit out of hand, but still…" Sylvia trailed off, leaving Ayato unsure of what she meant.

"Are you planning to take part?" he asked.

"Me? I'm more interested in the Lindvolus. And I still need to get revenge for the last time."

Sylvia had been the runner-up at the last Lindvolus, which meant that she had lost to Orphelia.

"I'm a sore loser, huh?" She laughed at herself.

After that, the two spoke casually as Ayato showed Sylvia around Seidoukan. As she had suggested, they took brief looks at all kinds of events, essentially spending the majority of their time wandering around the campus.

The sole exception was an event at the indoor pool called Water Survival, cohosted by the swimming and shooting clubs. It looked like a simple survival game, the contestants armed with water blasters, but from their seats on the second floor of the pool building, there seemed to be one contestant outshining all the rest.

"Hey, Ayato, don't you know her?"

"Eh?" He followed Sylvia's pointed finger. "Saya?!"

It was his childhood friend all right, holding a pair of large water blasters and dressed in a school swimsuit. Ayato didn't know what the rules were, but she seemed to be treating all the other contestants as enemies. There must have been more than twenty of them.

Saya was having no difficulty jumping between the countless

floating islands that dotted the pool, knocking her opponents into the water one by one with perfectly aimed shots.

"A-amazing! What an incredible performance from Miss Sasamiya! That's one of the Phoenix's top-four contestants for you, folks!" the student announcer cried excitedly over the loudspeaker.

"Mm-hmm… She's got good balance, that's for sure, but her vision must be incredible. Lining up those shots midair while dodging all those attacks, there's no way I could do that," Sylvia remarked, impressed.

Before long, Saya had knocked all the other contestants into the water, and a buzzer sounded to announce her victory.

"…And there you have it, folks!" the live reporter cried out, standing on a platform beside the pool as he pulled Saya's hand into the air. *"Match Three goes to Miss Sasamiya, who overwhelmed all opposition!"*

Saya, however, didn't seem particularly pleased, and her expression remained unchanged even when she was handed the trophy.

"Do you have any words for us, Miss Sasamiya?"

"…It's not enough."

"…Huh? Um, Miss Sasamiya…" The announcer cocked his head in confusion.

Saya seemed to be paying him no mind. "I want another go."

"Wha—? N-no! I'm sorry, but the match is over!"

As he watched Saya begin to push her way past the host, Ayato felt a chill run down his spine. "W-we should get going, Sylvie," he said, leading her away from the pool.

CHAPTER 4
SCHOOL FAIR RHAPSODY II

Miluše, the leader of Rusalka, had a corner suite on the top floor of the dormitory at Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies.

It was only thanks to being the school's third-ranked fighter that she was able to stay there. To Mahulena, who was both unranked and Rusalka's youngest member, it was like being in heaven.

But while Mahulena might have once yearned to live in this kind of place, she had long since been disillusioned of such admiration and envy. For better or for worse, that was probably not unrelated to the fact that she had been selected to join Rusalka, the second-most popular entity at Queenvale.

Sylvia really is amazing, but these people are something else entirely…

Mahulena let out a brief sigh before knocking at the door.

"Come on, Mahulena," came Miluše's exasperated voice as the door swung open. "You're late."

"Sorry. The chairwoman wanted to talk to me."

"Oh? I guess there's no helping it, then. Anyway, hurry up. Everyone's waiting for you." Miluše led her into the living room.

Miluše—and everyone else in Rusalka for that matter—didn't tend to think too much about things. Or rather, they thought about them, but the depth of their thinking was like the shallow end of a children's swimming pool.

Which was why Mahulena, the group's one member who was capable of understanding important issues—although she didn't like to think of herself as particularly special—was assigned the task of

receiving information and instructions from their manager and explaining it to everyone else in a way they could understand.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting…"

Just as Miluše had said, everyone was sitting around the table.

Even though Miluše's quarters were unusually spacious, they were so messily strewn with stuffed toys lying here and there, magazines piled up haphazardly on every flat surface, and worn clothes thrown carelessly on the floor, that Mahulena couldn't even think of a single compliment that wouldn't come across as sarcastic.

Of course, the cleaners would tidy it all back up again every three days, but it never took long for it to return to this kind of state.

Only the space surrounding the table was cleared of clutter, but judging by the dangerous-looking mounds that lined the walls, the mess had probably been swept aside just before everyone had arrived. Mahulena hesitantly took her seat at the corner.

"All right." Miluše beamed, her voice as rich and clear as one would expect from the group's vocalist. "Now that we're all here, I hereby declare the Conference on Finding a Way to Unseat Sylvia Lyyneheym open!"

"Yeah!"

"All right!"

"I can't wait!"

"…Yay…?"

It was a routine topic for them, but everyone except Mahulena seemed to be uncharacteristically excited given the fact that it was the seventy-third such conference. The others had probably long since lost count, but it was Mahulena's job after all to keep records of everything.

Given that they had performed at the Sirius Dome just a few hours earlier and then made the rounds greeting the executives from the integrated enterprise foundations who had come to inspect the school fair, Mahulena couldn't help wondering where their energy came from.

"Hey! Mahulena, are you listening?" Miluše was leaning forward, snapping her fingers in front of her face.

"Uh, y-yes. Sorry," the young woman stammered, forcing herself to sit up straight.

"We're going to come up with an awesome strategy, something that will leave that Sylvia speechless!" Miluše declared, clenching

her fists.

"Ah… I'll do my best," Mahulena responded, but she knew already that it would be useless.

Of course, that wasn't to say that Rusalka wasn't popular. The group had produced numerous worldwide hits, and it was no exaggeration to say that Sylvia was their only real opposition when it came to the charts.

But still, that wasn't enough for Miluše and the others.

And it wasn't as if Mahulena herself didn't think it would be wonderful to take Sylvia's position at the top of the music scene. She just knew that their opponent was too much for them. Sylvia Lyyneheym was the real thing, the kind of songstress who appeared only once in a hundred years, capable of inspiring devotion in the hearts of girls and old women alike. Rusalka, in contrast, was popular among the younger generations, but they tended to fall flat with older groups.

"Well, do you have any ideas?" Miluše asked, glancing around at her fellow members.

"Okay, then! Let's start with mine!" Tuulia, the group's rhythm guitarist, was the first to raise her hand.

"All right, that's the spirit, Tuulia! Come on, tell us!"

"We should go all out with force! Challenge her to a duel and take her down head-on!"

"…But haven't we tried that before…?" Mahulena asked tiredly. Even the other members looked unimpressed.

Tuulia had made the same proposal countless times already, insisting that if they couldn't beat her in the world of music, they could at least defeat her as students of Asterisk. As part of Sylvia's fame came from being Queenvale's number one, Tuulia insisted that it would be a terrible blow to her to lose to one of them in battle.

• Use force. Duel her head-on!
• Aim for her weak point. Attack her in the water!

But it wasn't as if they hadn't tried that already.

Each of them had challenged Sylvia to a duel, and they'd all been defeated one by one. And Mahulena, who hadn't even wanted to fight her but had been pressured into it by the others, had been defeated instantly.

Yet Tuulia waved her finger, a smile rising to her lips. "Tsk-tsk… You should let me finish. I've been thinking about it since, like, forever. And I've finally found her weakness."

"Her…weakness?!"

Everyone's eyes turned to Tuulia.

"Right, I'm being totally serious here. Listen, she needs to be able to sing to use her abilities, right? So all we need to be able to do is make sure she can't sing, and then we can show her who's best!"

"…It makes sense." The normally expressionless Päivi, the group's drummer, nodded.

"But how can we make sure she can't sing?" Monica, their bassist, asked, head tilted to one side.

Tuulia faltered, seemingly taken aback by the question. To Mahulena, it looked like she hadn't thought it through that far.

"I mean… Well, for example, like…in the water or something."

"…You mean duel her underwater?"

Underwater battles weren't unheard of in exhibition matches, but it would be pretty difficult to arrange that kind of situation for a duel or an official ranking match. It might work if they were to start the battle aboveground and try to lure her into the water, but she would probably have other tricks up her sleeve, like flying above the water's surface or just freezing it solid. For all they knew, she might even be able to just make the water turn back, like Moses parting the sea.

"Then what about attacking her when she's got a cold and can't sing?"

"…Do you think she'd accept a duel in that situation?"

"Okay, then other situations where she can't sing… Like in a vacuum?"

"…"

Mahulena was surprised not so much at Tuulia's suggestion as at the fact that she knew that sound couldn't travel though a

vacuum.

"All right, next!" Miluše interrupted with a clap, attempting to restart the conversation.

"I have an idea," Päivi said, her hand raised. "If Sylvia's ratings fall, ours should go up. All we have to do is spread some rumors that make her look bad, even if they're all made up."

"That's all well and good, but if it were to get out of hand, Benetnasch might get involved. That wouldn't be good."

Queenvale's covert ops unit, Benetnasch, specialized in manipulating public opinion and had even helped Rusalka reach their current position. If information damaging to Sylvia, the academy's prize symbol, were to get out, there was no doubt they would intervene.

"So why don't we just spread a bunch of small rumors about her, nothing so big that they would have to do anything?"

"Oh? Such as?"

"How about we say we saw her pocket a hundred-yen coin she found lying around somewhere?"

"…Anything else?"

"Or we say we saw her ignore a red light?"

Mahulena sighed. At that rate, it would take a century to drag her reputation down.

"Come on, my turn, my turn! I've got an idea!" This time, it was Monica with her hand raised. "It won't matter if Benetnasch gets involved so long as they don't know it was us, right? So, I mean, like, why don't we get one of the media clubs to spread it or something?"

Monica might have looked like the cutest and sweetest member of the group, but it was also she who had the most malicious character.

"Hmm, maybe… But there's no way they'd fall for bogus information."

Monica let out a quiet, foreboding laugh. "But what if we had *real* information?"

Everyone's gazes snapped toward her, their expressions serious.

"Don't tell me…you've got something?"

"It isn't concrete or anything… But I mean, don't you think she's been up to something lately?" Monica asked, extending her thumb suggestively.

Miluše and Tuulia's faces instantly turned red.

“N-n-no way?!”

“A b-b-boyfriend?!”

“If we can get our hands on some evidence, it’ll turn into a *huge* scandal. Even Benetnasch won’t be able to make it all go away too easily.”

Certainly, Mahulena thought, *if it were true, it could turn into Sylvia’s first—perhaps even her last—major scandal*. “B-but are you sure?”

“Who knows? I just happened to overhear the chairwoman say something like that. It’s not like I caught the whole conversation or anything,” Monica said, pulling a stuffed toy to her chest.

Mahulena had to admit that she did feel a touch of respect for her colleague every now and then, especially when she kept pushing the limits of her cunning nature.

Miluše, who had seemed to be deep in thought, suddenly looked up. “Speaking of which, she *is* taking a break during the school fair…”

“We were only given today’s performance because she turned it down, right?” Mahulena was only stating a simple fact, but she hadn’t been prepared for the other members’ reaction.

“That’s got nothing to do with it!” they shouted in unison, each of them glaring at her in disgust.

“Anyway, what we need to do is find out why she took three days off during one of the busiest times of the year.”

“Yeah, but what are we actually supposed to do? It’s not like we know anyone who can look into her private life, and we can’t exactly ask Benetnasch to do it for us,” Mahulena reminded them.

“Ugh… W-well, I guess not…” Miluše trailed off, until suddenly raising her face and making a loud, excited clap. “Right, that’s it! Why don’t we just check it out ourselves?”

“Huh? U-us…?”

“Why not? We’ve got the day off tomorrow anyway. Let’s find out for ourselves whether or not she actually has a boyfriend!”

“Whaaat?!” Mahulena jumped to her feet, but everyone else seemed to be quite taken by the suggestion.

“Sounds good!”

“Yeah, I’m on board!”

“Ha-ha! This’ll be fun!”

“W-wait, everyone…!” Mahulena urged, trying to calm them all down, but no one seemed to be paying her any attention. “Wouldn’t

we be better off spending the time practicing, though…?" she muttered, already half-resigned to her fate.

*

It was the second day of the school fair. Sylvia was showing Ayato around the lush grounds of Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies.

"I had no idea that everything could be so different. The buildings, the atmosphere…," Ayato said, taking in the surroundings.

"Well, yeah. But still, the vibe here is pretty similar to Seidoukan, don't you think? And I guess Gallardworth is pretty orthodox, too. But then you've got Le Wolfe and Jie Long and, like we saw yesterday, Allekant. They're all pretty distinctive."

After wandering around Seidoukan, they had decided to go to Allekant Académie as well. Ayato had to agree with Sylvia—it was a rather unusual place.

Seidoukan and Queenvale felt more or less like regular schools, but Allekant was more like a research institute. Everything down to the smallest detail seemed designed to emphasize functionality. There had been a lot of research announcements and scientific events but little in the way of actual festivities.

Perhaps that was why the turnout had been somewhat lower than at the other two, Ayato thought.

"This certainly looks like the most crowded one so far… Ah, sorry!" Ayato murmured after bumping into a passerby.

Even though they were strolling along a lakeside path somewhat removed from the center of the academy, without any stalls in sight, the area was still teeming with visitors.

"Come on, Ayato! This is our secret flower garden, after all! It's not like people can come and visit whenever they feel like it. It's only natural to want to take a look, don't you think?"

There were so many boys around that it was hard to imagine that it was actually a girl's school. What stood out to Ayato the most wasn't the visitors who had come from outside Asterisk but rather the number of students from the other academies.

"It's a good thing that everyone's so honest." Sylvia chuckled, but her expression at once turned grave, and she turned around, glancing behind her.

Ayato had noticed it, too. "…Is someone following us?"

“It looks like it.”

“Did someone recognize me…?”

“Hmm… Maybe me?”

There was no mistaking it. Someone was following them.

It could have been a fan or possibly a member of the media who had seen through their disguises, but then they seemed to be putting too much effort into hiding their presence for that. Whoever it was, they seemed to have melted into the crowd. They must have realized that they had been noticed.

“They don’t seem to be threatening, but what should we do?”

Sylvia, it seemed, had come up with the same idea that he had. “I don’t want to waste our date, but why don’t we split up for a little while? At least then we’ll know which of us they’re after.”

“Wouldn’t that be dangerous?”

It wasn’t a bad plan, but splitting up also meant dividing their strength.

But Sylvia looked at him with an amused smile. “Thanks for worrying about me, but I *am* the runner-up of the Lindvolus, you know?”

“…I guess so,” Ayato replied, smiling back at her.

Sylvia ought to be the second-strongest student in Asterisk, at least in theory.

“Besides, I don’t think anyone would try to attack us in a place like this.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

Ayato certainly couldn’t sense anything particularly dangerous about their pursuer.

“Where should we meet…? I suppose we can contact each other whenever we need to, but it might be best to leave the campus. But you probably don’t know this area well, do you?”

Ayato was about to nod, when he suddenly remembered a place that he had been once before. “Ah, I’ve been to this café, though… This one.” He opened a small air-window displaying the place that Eishirou had told him about.

“Ah, I know it. All right!” Sylvia nodded as if that settled it, signaling with her eyes where they should split up.

And with that, they headed straight into the most crowded area in the heart of the academy. They turned in opposite directions at the exact same moment, Sylvia going right, Ayato going left.

Ayato began to increase his pace, taking care so as not to bump

into anyone.

The grounds around the campus were filled with greenery. Seidoukan also had a good amount of green spaces, but they were more parklike, while Queenvale's seemed to be filled with natural groves and hillocks. Of course, Ayato reminded himself, the city was a man-made island, so they were both equally artificial.

After coming out of one of those groves, he came to a sudden stop.

It seemed that he had finally found a quiet area, so he shouldn't have any difficulty sensing anyone in pursuit.

"…Maybe I lost them?" he wondered aloud.

He scanned his surroundings, but there didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary.

Maybe it was Sylvia whom they were following after all, he mused.

"I'd better call her…," he muttered to himself, taking out his mobile, when he noticed a girl approaching down the footpath in front of him. He began to brace himself for a confrontation but relaxed when he couldn't sense anything unusual about her.

He let out a brief sigh, moving to give her room to pass. The girl nodded lightly as she walked by.

But then, for some reason, she came to a sudden stop, turning around and staring straight at Ayato's face.

"…Um, is something wrong?"

"…" The girl tilted her head to one side, a quizzical expression on her face, her long, glossy black hair drooping straight down. "… Ayato?"

"Ah…" He brushed a hand over his glasses and hairband, but everything seemed to be in order. "Um, no, I mean, I'm…" He stood fumbling for some kind of explanation, unable to work out how she had seen through the disguise, when—

"It's been a long time. It's me, Yuzuhi," she said, bowing deeply.

"Yuzuhi…?" he repeated, when the name clicked. "Yuzuhi?! From the Yatsuka Dojo?!"

"The very one!" The black-haired girl, Yuzuhi Renjouji, smiled sweetly.

"B-but…what are you doing here…?"

The last time they had met, Yuzuhi had been learning archery at the Yatsuka Dojo, one of several family branches of the Amagiri

Shinmei style.

Among the dojos that taught the Amagiri Shinmei style, the Yatsuka Dojo specialized in passing down the art of archery. The head dojo of course taught archery as well, but it had long since ceased to teach the Master Techniques. For those, students had to go to the Yatsuka Dojo. Not being particularly well suited to archery, Ayato himself had never had a chance to study those techniques, but he had accompanied his sister several times when she'd gone to visit, when he was a kid.

He had gotten to know Yuzuhi during that period, and since they were the same age, they'd spoken to each other often. Nonetheless, he had stopped going to the Yatsuka Dojo once Haruka disappeared, so it must have been years since they'd last seen each other.

"Didn't anyone tell you? I've been a student here at Queenvale since last year," Yuzuhi said, pointing to her school crest.

"…No, sorry. This is the first I've heard of it." Ayato scratched his cheek, mentally cursing his father.

"I've heard about all your achievements. I know it's late, but I really wanted to congratulate you for winning the Phoenix. I should have gone to see you earlier, but I didn't want to trouble you…"

From the time they were children, she'd always been incredibly conscientious.

"But you've really changed your image! When I was watching the Phoenix, you looked more—"

"Ah, well—can you come with me?" Ayato said, surveying his surroundings, before stepping off the footpath and leading her back into the grove.

Once there, he took off his glasses and hit the switch on the hairband.

"How's this?"

"…Oh, I see. So it was a disguise." Yuzuhi nodded.

"Well, it can't have been that good. I mean, you saw through it right away."

"That's not it. Your bearing and your way of walking looked like how we're taught in the Amagiri Shinmei style, so I thought maybe… It just got me thinking. Sorry for asking out of nowhere like that."

"You've still got sharp eyes…," Ayato murmured, remembering back when even his father had had to acknowledge her archery skills.

But before she could respond, Ayato's mobile began to ring.

"Ah… Sorry, can I have a minute?" he excused himself, before opening a small air-window.

"*Ayato?*" Sylvia asked, her expression hesitant. "*Did they follow you?*"

"Huh? No, they didn't come this way… I thought they must have gone after you?"

"*Hmm, maybe. I thought I sensed them for a while, but then there was a bit of a commotion, and they disappeared,*" Sylvia answered, seemingly disappointed.

"What kind of commotion?"

"*I'll tell you in person,*" she said, and the air-window snapped closed.

Ayato wasn't particularly satisfied with the outcome, either, but he had to admit that it was better than finding themselves dragged into a dangerous situation.

"Sorry, Yuzuhi. It looks like something's come up. Let's talk properly some other time."

"Not at all." Yuzuhi shook her head. "I'm keeping a friend waiting, too."

They made their way back to the footpath, bowed to each other in farewell, and headed off in opposite directions, when Yuzuhi turned around with a start.

"Ah, that's right," she said as if suddenly remembering something. "There's something that I should tell you. According to the rumors, you're going to take part in the Gryps, right?"

"Ah, yeah…"

"So am I."

"Eh?"

"If we end up being put against each other, please don't be too hard on me." Yuzuhi smiled gently, her hair billowing in the wind.

"…Me, too," Ayato answered with a grin. "What are your teammates like?"

"Well…" Yuzuhi paused for a moment, before answering with a smile. "They're very fun people."

It was such a typical answer for her that Ayato couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"Huh? Did I say something funny…?"

"No, sorry. Not at all… Well then, let's do our best, the both of us."

"Yes. See you around."

"Look after yourself."

They parted ways again, Ayato following the footpath back to the center of the campus.

"…I'd rather not have to fight her, though," he murmured, his true feelings slipping out.

He had no idea how strong she had become in the years since they had last met, but at the very least she would have a considerable advantage in long-range combat.

The only thing going in his favor was that she didn't have the fastest reflexes.

If she hadn't managed to overcome that, he would be able to beat her in close combat, at least.

Of course, that was assuming that he could shorten the distance between them in the first place.

"Well… It should be this way, I think…"

It looked like he had made it back to the main entrance.

The space in front of him was filled with all kinds of stalls and absolutely teeming with visitors.

"…"

But something was wrong. He could feel people's gazes all turning toward him.

Not the gazes of his pursuers but eyes of pure curiosity.

Not a small number of those milling in front of him came to a stop, staring at him in astonishment. A low buzz had begun to spread among them like ripples fanning out.

"U-um…," said one girl, stepping out from the crowd, hand outstretched, face bright red. She was wearing a Queenvale uniform, so she must have been a student. "Um, you're Ayato Amagiri, the Murakumo, right? I'm a huge fan! W-will you shake my hand?"

Only then did Ayato remember that he had removed his disguise.

"Ah, sorry… Actually, I—"

But before he could say anything more, she had already taken his hand in hers and had begun to shake it with an unexpected level of enthusiasm. "Thank you! Um, could I get your autograph, too…?" she asked, handing him a pen and notepad from her bag. "Ah, please write my name, too! Um, Violet, here, yes… Thank you so much!"

The girl left, holding the notepad to her chest like a prize trophy, her face filled with joy.

And then—

"Look! It's the Murakumo!"

"C-could I get your signature, too…?"

"Can I take a photo?"

"Awesome! Rusalka *and* the Murakumo!"

Ayato turned around and ran, just as the crowd that had been building around him began to surge forward like an avalanche.

*

"…I see. That must have been rough," Sylvia consoled him from

across their table at the Macondo.

"I had no idea people would make such a fuss…"

He might have managed to escape from the crowd, but he had arrived at the café long past their arranged meeting time.

But far from reproaching him, Sylvia offered words of consolation. "I told you before, you're more popular than you realize. And everyone who comes to the school fair is going to be a fan of the Festa, you know?"

"I'll try to remember that," Ayato replied, lifting his ice coffee to his lips.

When he was finally able to calm his nerves, he remembered what he had meant to ask her. "By the way, you said something about a commotion?"

"Ah, well, I guess it is related…" Sylvia paused, her shoulders trembling with laughter.

"Sylvie?"

"Hee-hee. Sorry, sorry… You remember Rusalka, that group that had that live concert yesterday, right? It looks like they were wandering around the campus without even trying to disguise themselves. Well, I mean, it looks like they were trying to hide, but all it took was one person to notice them, and…"

"Oh… That must have been quite difficult for them."

Given the furor that had arisen for him, he could only imagine the uproar that people would have made for real stars.

"It's been taken care of. Anyway, I lost whoever was following me at the same time."

"I see…"

It would no doubt be impossible to keep a tail on someone through such mayhem, after all.

"Hee-hee. Those kids…!" Sylvia chortled, unable to control her laughter.

"But you're amazing, Sylvie. I mean, you're just going everywhere you want, without anyone seeing through that disguise."

If she were found out, the chaos would no doubt shake the very foundations of the earth.

"And you're hanging out with me today… I know it's probably too late to ask this, but are you sure you're okay with me around?"

As far as Ayato was aware, Sylvia had never been involved in so much as a single scandal. Of course, the integrated enterprise

foundation W&W was backing her, and they would no doubt have put a lid on anything that did pop up—but if, for example, one of the other IEFs were to get involved, it would be difficult to keep the situation under control.

"Hmm, I suppose it *would* be pretty shocking if people knew I was wandering around the school fair on a secret date, don't you think? We might even have to hold a press conference to explain everything." Sylvia's tone of voice was playful, but to Ayato it was no joking matter.

"N-n-no… I'm being serious."

"Ha-ha, all right. You don't need to worry. I'm more experienced than those girls."

"Experienced?"

"Yep. I've been doing this for years, and I haven't been found out once."

Her disguise *was* quite impressive, Ayato had to admit. All she had done was put on a hat, change the color of her hair, and adjust the tone of her voice, and yet she seemed like a totally different person. Her transformation was so complete, Ayato doubted that even he would recognize her if she decided to follow him.

"But still, are you sure you're one hundred percent okay with it?"

"If something happens, then so be it. Maybe I'll retire or something?"

"Wha—?! Retire?!"

She had said the words so easily that their sheer gravity almost flew right by him.

"I only chose this position so that I could get as many people as possible to hear my songs. If people don't want to listen to what I have to say, then there would be no point in continuing."

The Festa was unmistakably the world's most popular form of entertainment, so there could be no better stage for communicating with the world.

But could she really fight with that alone?

Perhaps she had read his thoughts, as she began to explain herself. "Of course, I do have another reason, too. I want to be strong."

"…You're pretty strong already, Sylvie."

"Ha-ha, thanks. But I don't just mean in fighting ability. I'm talking more generally. I want to be a strong person, in my heart, in

my position, in everything that I set out to do. So I need to work hard to improve myself."

She seemed to have a stoic approach to life, Ayato thought.

"Anyway, strong people can do just about anything, don't you think? So the choices available to me would open up, and I'd be able to help people. The old me was never able to do that."

"Huh…?"

Her voice had trailed off toward the end. Ayato had no idea what she meant.

But before he had a chance to ask, Sylvia continued, "I do think my current position is worthwhile, and it's not like I have any regrets or anything. But you know, if all I wanted was for people to listen to my songs, there would be other ways to do that. And there are other things that I want to do, other things that I have to do…"

"What kind of things?" Ayato asked cautiously.

Sylvia looked at him seriously. "Say, Ayato. Since we're here now, can I ask you something?"

"Huh? All right, I guess…"

"Did you really find your sister?"

"!" Ayato gasped, his expression turning tense.

No one, except of course those directly involved, was supposed to know about Haruka. Nor should his wish from the Phoenix have been public knowledge, either.

"…How do you know about that?"

"I *am* a student council president, you know. That gives me access to all kinds of information. Like the latest thing I heard—that your sister has been asleep all this time in the hospital."

"…So you know that much…," he replied, his gaze turning sharp.

But Sylvia merely let out a deep sigh, visibly relaxing. "I see. So it *is* true." She leaned back in her chair, looking up at the ceiling for a short while before continuing. "I'm sorry, Ayato. Saying that kind of thing out of the blue."

Ayato found himself relaxing at the sight of her usual warm smile. "Why do you ask?"

"I should have started from the beginning. It's complicated," Sylvia said, gulping down her now lukewarm coffee. "…The truth is, I'm looking for someone, too."

"You're looking…for someone? But can't you just…?"

When Ayato had been searching for Flora, Sylvia had used her

abilities to find her. Surely, she would be able to use her abilities for her own desires…?

She must have read his thoughts yet again, because she flashed him a troubled smile. “I can use my abilities for seeking, but that doesn’t mean I can find whatever or whoever I like. I need to be able to narrow down the range, at least to some extent. The amount of prana it requires depends on the range, after all.”

“I see… So it’s no good if all you know is that they have to be someone in the world.”

“It wouldn’t matter how good you are at seeking, if you tried something like that, you’d use up all your prana in an instant,” Sylvia said with a shrug. “And besides, as I’m sure you know, as long as someone pours enough money into countermeasures, it’s possible to remain completely hidden. Here in Asterisk, each school’s most valuable secrets, all the important buildings in the administrative area, the hospital, and the VIP rooms at all the five-star hotels—they’re all set up that way.”

“So it didn’t work…?”

“Well, I don’t know if I would put it that way…,” she murmured. “I suspected from the beginning that they must be somewhere here in Asterisk, so the range wasn’t a problem. And I did get a reaction.”

“In that case—”

But Sylvia interrupted him with a shake of her head. “No matter what I do, I can’t narrow it down. There’s no doubt that they’re here in this city, but I can’t work out exactly where.” She wasn’t used to getting vague results from her seeking ability, judging by her dispirited tone of voice.

“So there’s no other option but to go around looking in person… Ah, so that was what you were doing back then?”

It was in the Rotlicht, on the outskirts of the redevelopment area, that Ayato had first met Sylvia.

He had always wondered why a world-famous songstress would be out alone in such a place, but it made sense if she was looking for someone.

Maybe, Ayato thought, that was also the real purpose of their three-day date.

“Yep. Whenever I can make time, I go out looking for them. And the redevelopment area is the most likely place to look.”

“The most likely…?”

Sylvia paused for a moment before continuing. "…The person who I'm looking for…they took part in the Eclipse."

"…"

So that was it.

If she knew that Haruka had also taken part in the illegal tournament, Queenvale's intelligence organization would have to be really something.

"So I thought that if they had found your sister, maybe you would have heard something that could help me…"

"I see."

If that was the case, she would surely have been disheartened to learn about the state that Haruka was in.

"I don't have a lot of information about the Eclipse or anything… Ah, don't misunderstand me. I didn't have that in mind when I first met you." Sylvia waved her hands in denial.

"Ha-ha, I know."

It would have been impossible to plan to meet the way they did.

"After we met, I looked into you a little. When I learned that you were also looking for someone, I felt like we had something in common," Sylvia said, uncharacteristically embarrassed.

"Sylvia… Can I ask you something?"

"Please."

"Who are you looking for exactly?"

If she was willing to go to such lengths for them, they must be very important to her. But judging by how she spoke about them, they didn't sound like a relative, as in Ayato's case.

Which meant—

"Oh? Do you want to know? But it isn't what you're thinking. The person who I'm looking for is a woman," Sylvia teased. "She's my teacher."

"Your teacher?"

"Right. The person who taught me about music, about the world," she answered, raising a hand to her breast.

It was clear from her way of speaking that she had strong feelings about that person.

"I see. You can ask Haruka directly, if you like, when she wakes up."

"…Thank you, Ayato." Sylvia smiled in relief, looking for the first time like a girl of her age. "It feels good to get that off my

chest. Well then, shall we go to the next one?"

"Uh… Gallardworth, right? Do we still have time?"

"I can't afford to waste my day off. Come on!"

"All right…" Ayato, impressed, gulped down the last of his iced coffee.

He felt as if he were finally beginning to understand the person behind the name of Sylvia Lyyneheym.

But he sensed there were still depths to her heart that he had yet to witness.

*

"Oh my god, being popular is such a drag… Ah-ha-ha-ha…" Miluše let out an exhausted laugh, collapsing onto the sofa in her room.

Despite her attempts to lighten the situation, her tone of voice could hardly be frailer.

It didn't matter how much she enjoyed being a member of Rusalka, she would always end up like this after several hours of handshaking and autographs.

Even Mahulena was so sapped of energy that she couldn't lift herself off the floor.

"Argh! We finally get a day off, and we end up spending it signing autographs! Why?!" Monica cried, banging her fists against the bed, no doubt having completely forgotten that the excursion had been her idea in the first place.

"It was all going fine until we started following them." Tuulia groaned, sitting with her face flat on the table.

Miluše's room was directly across the hall from Sylvia's, so they had all taken turns watching her door in secret, waiting for her to come out.

Everything had been going well…until she left her room in disguise, and they set off after her. They'd had to leave in such a hurry that they hadn't had time to prepare any disguises of their own.

Even so, everyone in Rusalka—everyone except Mahulena, that is—was part of the Named Cult. They should have been able to disguise themselves without any problem. In any normal situation, it would have been inconceivable that any of them could have been found out so easily.

So if there was any one reason for what had happened—

“We should have split up,” Päivi said, giving voice to what they were all no doubt thinking.

If all five of them went out together, they would stand out no matter how well they disguised themselves.

Even the fact that their quarry had realized she was being followed and had tried to shake them off was nothing compared to the trouble of being discovered by their fans. If they’d been working, they would have been able to let their security team take care of them, but they had, after all, taken the day off.

And what was more, if it had been only one or two fans, they might have been able to deal with them, but a whole flood of them? There was nothing they could have done.

“But still!” Miluše raised her voice, standing atop the sofa with her arm outstretched. “We were right!”

“She did seem to be on a d-d-date…”

Even Mahulena had been taken by surprise. She had never expected that Sylvia would risk going out on a date in broad daylight, no matter how good her disguise.

“If only we could have seen who he was…”

“All the photos were from behind. You can’t see his face in any of them…”

They had taken particular care not to be noticed, so they hadn’t been able to get their hands on any clear evidence. Even if they took it to the media, there would be no way of proving anything.

“But you all saw him! The way he carried himself! He has to be important, right? We’ll work it out, we just need to hold on a bit longer!”

At that moment, Mahulena’s mobile began to ring.

“Ah, excuse me,” she murmured, opening up a pitch-black air-window. It was a voice-only call.

A sudden tension ran between her partners. They could all guess who it was.

“*Mahulena. I trust you enjoyed your day off.*”

“O-of course, ma’am!”

“*I’m glad to hear it. The others are all with you, I assume? Tell them that I want to see you all in my office within the next five minutes. I hope that you have an explanation for causing such a ruckus today.*”

“U-understood…!”

It was a brief exchange, but it was enough to turn the whole room upside down.

“Arghhh! Sh-she knows! Why—how—did she find out?!”

“…I’d be more surprised if she didn’t hear about it…”

“No! She’s going to give us another lecture…”

“We’ll be lucky if that’s all…”

Monica and Päivi seemed to have already resigned themselves to their fate.

“Argh! This is all *her* fault! I’ll remember this, Sylvia Lyyneheym!” Miluše cried out.

It was one thing to blame her for their current situation, but voicing it wouldn’t change anything, Mahulena thought with despair.

She let out a deep sigh, racking her brains to at least come up with some excuse, anything at all, that offered a chance at salvation.

CHAPTER 5
SCHOOL FAIR RHAPSODY III

In the Saint Gallardworth Academy student council room…

"That's all that I have to report."

"Good. It looks like we can expect to have another successful year." Ernest Fairclough, sitting at his ebony desk, nodded calmly after listening to the various reports relating to the school fair.

"Everything looks to be in order. We haven't had any serious trouble yet, in any event." Laetitia, lounging on the sofa, let out a sigh of relief.

Gallardworth always placed special emphasis on order and justice, but because the school fair involved so many visitors from outside the academy, there was always a certain amount of trouble that had to be taken care of each year.

But things this time, it seemed, were going surprisingly smooth.

"I can't help feeling a little envious of Allekant and Queenvale this time of year." Laetitia sighed, rubbing her shoulders.

In Asterisk, most people assumed that each of the student council heads had immense power, but in reality, it was mainly just Gallardworth and Seidoukan where they had a hand in everything from administration to the management of events.

For Allekant, mired as it was in factionalism, the student council played little more than a coordinating role. At Queenvale, the chairwoman held all the real power, with the student council being merely for show. The situation at Jie Long had varied over time, but in general, they tended to leave things to their integrated enterprise foundation.

Le Wolfe used to operate like Gallardworth and Seidoukan, but

things had changed ever since Dirk Eberwein had taken over the student council presidency. It seemed that the majority of his staff were recruited from Le Wolfe's IEF, so it could hardly be said to be managed by students.

Of course, that wasn't to say that the Gallardworth's and Seidoukan's student councils were granted full independence from their own research conglomerates. They, too, relied on their corporate benefactors when necessary, but there was no denying that they exercised much more discretion in doing so.

"We only need to worry about ourselves, Laetitia. That's what the others will be doing, and they'll no doubt have problems of their own to worry about."

"I understand that…" She held her tongue, but she seemed to have more that she wanted to get off her chest.

The night was already late, and they still had a few things left to settle before they could call it a day.

"By the way, speaking of Queenvale, do you know what happened with Sophia's participation in the Gryps?"

"Who knows? I haven't heard anything… She isn't a child anymore, though, so I don't have any right to interfere with whatever she's decided to do."

"That may be so, but still…"

Sophia Fairclough, a student at Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies, was Ernest's younger sister.

She might have been older than the Queenvale student, but Laetitia had learned a lot from her. That was why she was so concerned.

Ever since an accident when she was little, Sophia had borne a fatal trauma that reared its head whenever she competed in the Festa. It was because of that trauma that Laetitia had been so strongly opposed to her coming to Asterisk in the first place.

But if even Ernest, her own brother, wouldn't say anything to her, then there was no way that she, an outsider, could interfere.

"Ah yes—," Percival Gardner began, the student council secretary, who despite having finished her report seemed to have just remembered something.

While dressed in a boy's uniform, Percival was a well-born lady and Gallardworth's fifth-ranked knight. Moreover, she was the first student in twenty years to use Gallardworth's Holy Grail of Orga Luxes, the Horn of Atonement, commonly known as the Amalthean

Goat.

"I happened to see Her Excellency, the student council president of Queenvale Academy, today."

"Sigrdrífa was here?"

This was the first they'd heard of it, which meant she must have come in secret.

"Yes. She was disguised. It looks like no one else recognized her."

"Oh? She must be so carefree," Laetitia murmured, sipping her freshly poured tea.

The campus was open to the public during the school fair, so everyone was free to come and go as they pleased—even the student council presidents of the other schools. If, for example, Le Wolfe's student council president had decided to come, they would of course have had to keep a careful eye on whatever he was plotting, but in Sylvia Lyyneheym's case, they shouldn't have much to worry about, Laetitia thought.

But—

"She had a companion. He was disguised, too, but I think it might have been Seidoukan's Murakumo."

"Bffft?!" Startled, Laetitia all but spat out her tea. "Y-you're saying the Witch of Fearsome Melody *and* the Gathering Clouds came here? Together?"

"Yes," Percival answered disinterestedly.

Laetitia had no idea what kind of connection the two had, but for Seidoukan's number one fighter and winner of the Phoenix to be working together with Queenvale's number one fighter and student council president—who also happened to be the runner-up at the last Lindvolus—was beyond ordinary.

"Ernest, what do you think?"

"Hmm… I'm afraid I don't know what they're trying to achieve."

"Maybe they're scouting out their opposition for the Gryps…," Laetitia wondered, her finger resting on her chin.

It was widely considered all but certain that Ayato Amagiri would be participating in the next Gryps. That being the case, it wasn't particularly surprising that he would want to sound out the Silverwinged Knights, who were not only the favorite to win but were also the champions of the previous two team tournaments.

As for Sylvia Lyyneheym, everyone knew she had her eye on

the Lindvolus, but Queenvale's Rusalka was widely expected to take part in the Gryps.

"…Hmm…" Ernest folded his arms, a faint smile rising to his lips.

It was different from his usual countenance. For a split second, Laetitia thought she'd caught a glimpse of the real Ernest Fairclough.

"In any event, it's a shame we weren't able to greet them, considering they came all that way."

"Ernest…?" As she watched his expression, Laetitia felt a bad premonition rising up inside her.

"I guess that leaves me no choice. We can't turn down the princess's invitation now."

"W-wait! You can't seriously be talking about taking part in that thing?!"

"If I'm not mistaken, he's been entered as a guest participant. It will be a good opportunity for me to get the measure of him with my own eyes."

Laetitia felt as if she should do something to stop him, but Ernest seemed to have already made up his mind.

"Percival, can we finish some of tomorrow's workload today? I want to free up some time."

"Very well."

Laetitia, ignoring Percival's impassive response, was unable to leave the matter at that. "Ernest! If you go there thinking only about yourself, the Runesword will—"

"Don't worry, Laetitia. This isn't about me. It's about the whole school."

"B-but, if you're not careful…" She trailed off.

If Ernest thought so, there wasn't anything she could do.

The Lei-Glems, the Blade of White Purification, had acknowledged more than twenty people throughout the history of Saint Gallardworth Academy, each of whom had been granted the title Pendragon, but it was said that out of all of them, Ernest possessed the highest affinity with the Orga Lux.

Or rather than affinity, it was more that he knew how to deal with it.

The cost of using the Lei-Glems was called *nobility*, the need to be an agent of justice and order. That so-called justice, however, was only what existed in the mind of the Orga Lux and was labeled

as such simply because what the Lei-Glems wanted seemed to resemble—at least in part—the kind of chivalry and social ideals predominant during the Middle Ages.

For someone who couldn't submit to it, the Lei-Glems was difficult to handle.

Ernest, however, had the rare talent of being able to understand its will and had even succeeded in adjusting his own thoughts and actions to accommodate it.

"There's no need to worry. I won't overdo it. But even taking the Murakumo out of the equation, I'm still a little concerned about this event."

"Well… I suppose it is unusual, having three of the schools cooperate on an event of this scale."

"Yes, of course… But I'm more concerned about what's happening behind the scenes. The princess hardly ever steps foot out of Jie Long, after all."

"Do you think she's up to something?" Laetitia asked suspiciously.

But Ernest, his expression grave as if lost in thought, didn't answer.

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"…A casino? The whole school?"

"Right. Le Wolfe does it every year. It's customary for them."

It was the third day of the school fair. The two of them had made their way to the Le Wolfe Black Institute. The campus had left Ayato speechless.

The architecture of the school buildings called to mind the rugged, intimidating appearance of a fortress, but they had been decorated garishly for the school fair. Ayato doubted whether he had ever seen anything so dubious.

"Well, the students here aren't proactive enough to arrange this kind of event by themselves. Officially, the school organizes everything, but I've heard they pretty much just leave it all to the Rotlicht."

"So that's why it feels so similar…"

Even though it was open to the public, there were clearly fewer visitors than at the other schools.

There were stalls lined up outside like at the others, but the

prices were quite high. On top of that, the storekeepers all looked the very opposite of friendly. The walls were coated in all kinds of graffiti, obscene words and lewd pictures alike. It clearly wasn't the kind of place ordinary tourists would want to visit.

But despite all that, the casino itself seemed to be doing quite well.

An arena-like structure was filled with row upon row of slot machines and professional baccarat and blackjack tables. Amid the quiet enthusiasm, men in black suits and women dressed in bunny outfits were busy serving visitors all throughout the hall.

"Do you want to have a go?" Sylvia jibed.

"I'll pass. I'm not very good at that sort of thing," Ayato replied with a faint smile.

"You certainly don't look like a gambler… Wait, what's going on?" She frowned for a moment before looking away uncomfortably.

Ayato glanced toward where she had been facing, to find that a girl serving drinks had collapsed on the ground, probably having tripped over something.

"Hey, c'mon, miss, cut me some slack. This has to be the fifth time already."

"Ugh… I'm so sorry!"

"The president introduced you, so I didn't want to say anything, but c'mon, miss, you aren't cut out for this. I mean, we might be shorthanded and all, but—"

"B-but the president asked me to do it, and now he's away on business! As his secretary, I can't give up!"

The black-suited man scratched his head, seemingly unsure how to respond.

"I think I've seen her before somewhere…," Ayato murmured.

"Oh? Do you know her?"

"Um… Right, she's the Tyrant's secretary."

Sylvia's eyes opened wide in surprise. "Oh, Korona Kashimaru?"

"Ah, that was her name. Is she famous?"

Sylvia nodded, though her expression was noncommittal. "I wouldn't say famous, exactly. More like mysterious… Dirk Eberwein is famous. You must have heard that he selects people based only on their abilities, right? So there were a lot of rumors going around when he chose a first-year student to be his secretary. That she must be extraordinarily talented or something like that.

But she hardly ever appears in public, so I've been wondering for a while what kind of person she is."

"Extraordinarily talented, huh…?"

It might have been rude of him to think so, but those words didn't seem to suit the girl bowing her head repeatedly to the black-suited man.

She had left much the same impression the last time he had seen her, when she had taken him and Julis to see Dirk Eberwein.

"She doesn't really look like she belongs at Le Wolfe."

"I agree. But then why did the Tyrant choose her to be his secretary?"

The two of them fell silent for a long moment, before Sylvia suddenly grabbed his arm and began to lead him outside.

"…You're staring too much," she whispered. "Let's get out of here before they start getting suspicious."

Now that she mentioned it, Ayato had begun to feel the gazes of several of the black-suited men following him through the building.

Sylvia seemed to have a good sense for that kind of thing.

"Heh… This is why I don't like Le Wolfe," Sylvia grumbled once they had left the building.

"Well, it is a casino. I suppose they'd want to keep an eye on everyone."

"It's not that. I just can't feel comfortable here. You know it's dangerous for a girl to come here alone, right? You don't know what kind of weirdos are going to come after you." She paused there, putting an arm through his. "But you're with me today, so I don't need to worry about that, right?"

"Ha-ha… I'm honored to be of use, but, um, don't you think you're holding on a bit too tightly…?"

"Let's get some lunch," Sylvia said, brushing his comment aside. "It's a little early, but we still have to go to Jie Long. And you have your event in the evening, too, right?" She glanced around restlessly. "Hmm, it's a bit overpriced here… And the shops will probably be full around this time… Huh?"

"What is it…?" Ayato asked, when he noticed a delicious aroma wafting over from somewhere nearby.

They chased after the scent, arriving at a large stall in the corner of the courtyard. There were a number of simple chairs and tables lined up in front of it.

"Welcome!" a girl in a cute apron called out to them. "Would

you like to try some paella?"

"Huh?" Ayato startled, sure that he had seen her somewhere before. "Priscilla?" he cried a moment later, with notable artlessness.

Priscilla merely stared back at him in confusion.

"Geez, Ayato…," Sylvia muttered.

He had completely forgotten he was still wearing his disguise.

"Um, I'm so sorry. Have we met…?"

"Ah, well…" He averted his gaze, unsure how to respond.

Priscilla, however, continued to study his face, when she suddenly covered her mouth as if to hide her astonishment. "Mr. Amagiri?!" she exclaimed, before hurriedly lowering her voice.

"Ha-ha… It's been a while."

"Yes. I heard that there was some trouble during the Phoenix, but congratulations on your victory," the girl said with a genuine smile.

"Thank you. I know that it's a little late, but I wanted to thank you for those snacks. They were delicious."

"No, not at all… It was the least I could do, after all you'd done for me…" She looked away, her cheeks flushed.

Ayato was referring to the food that Irene had given him when he was looking for Flora. He had been in such a hurry afterward that he had neglected to thank the two sisters.

"Ah, if you aren't in a hurry, why don't you stop by? I mean, it isn't much, but—"

"Is this your cooking?"

"Ah yes…"

In that case, it was sure to be delicious, Ayato thought.

He glanced toward Sylvia, who had been watching their exchange in silence.

"I don't mind." She nodded. "It certainly smells good."

"Um, Mr. Amagiri, who's your friend?" Priscilla asked cautiously, staring at Sylvia's school crest.

It looked like she couldn't see through Sylvia's disguise, either.

But Sylvia didn't wait for Ayato to introduce her. "Hello," she said with a gentle laugh. "We're on a date."

"Wha—?! S-s-sorry! I didn't mean to intrude!" Priscilla stammered, her face turning scarlet. "U-um… I'll go and get a menu! P-please sit wherever you like…!" And with that, she fled inside the stall.

"…Sylvie."

"It's the truth, isn't it?"

"It is, but you know…" Ayato trailed off. He felt strangely guilty.

Sylvia smiled in apology. "I'm sorry. I didn't think her reaction would be so cute… That's a rare kind of innocence these days. I'm a little envious, to be honest."

"You're actually pretty similar, you two, you know."

Maybe it was because it was still early in the day, but more than half the tables were empty.

They sat themselves down at one of them, when Sylvia let out a deep sigh. "In my kind of work, you end up seeing only the bad sides of people. And it might not mean much in practice, but I'm a student council president, which only makes it worse…"

"I think you're an honest, straightforward kind of person, though."

"…!"

Ayato was only telling her what he truly believed, but Sylvia seemed taken by surprise for a split second, before averting her gaze.

"You really do have the strangest sense of timing, Ayato…"

"Huh?"

But before he had a chance to ask her what she meant, Priscilla, her face still red, came hurrying over with a menu.

"S-sorry to keep you waiting!"

Ayato glanced over it for a long moment before deciding to let Priscilla choose for him.

"By the way," he began casually before she could head back to the stall. "Is Irene with you?"

"Ah… She's probably at the casino." Priscilla shrugged, her expression troubled. "Oh, but she did say that she would be at the event this evening. The one that you're going to."

"What? Irene, too?"

"She mentioned a huge prize being offered, I think."

He hadn't been paying much attention at the time, but he seemed to remember Eishirou saying something about there being a large sum of money up for grabs by the winner.

"That sounds like Irene," he said, when he suddenly noticed something. "Priscilla, have you been training?"

"Huh? Y-you can tell…?" She lifted a hand to her mouth in

shock.

"You're walking differently, and you seem to have a bit more muscle on you."

"Yes… I have been doing a little training, and sis has been teaching me all kinds of things. I can't rely on her to protect me forever."

"Oh, that's pretty impressive."

Priscilla blushed at the compliment. "Sh-she invited me to the event, but I'm still a bit scared…"

"Well, I think you made the right choice. Even I don't really know what it's about."

There was certainly nothing to suggest that it was meant for beginners.

"I'll be cheering for both you and your lady friend!" Priscilla said with an embarrassed grin, before heading back toward the stall.

After watching her go, Ayato noticed that Sylvia was staring at him as if she wanted to say something.

"Wh-what is it?"

"It must be nice, having such a dedicated fan."

"You're one to talk."

Sylvia's fan base was beyond comparison with his own.

"She's different, though, from mine."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it." She sighed with exasperation.

It wasn't long before their orders arrived.

"Oh, it's Basque-style! It looks delicious!"

The paella that Priscilla had cooked for him and Julis during the Festa had been exquisite, so he had let her recommend another for them this time, too, but the ingredients and aroma seemed to be quite different.

It only took one mouthful, however, for him to realize that it was just as delicious.

Sylvia, her mouth widening into a broad smile, seemed to be enjoying it, too.

"Mmm… This is amazing. I almost want to ask her for her recipe."

"Do you cook, too?"

"There's no need to act so surprised. Even idols know how to cook, you know." Sylvia pouted.

“Sorry, sorry, that wasn’t what I meant.” Ayato waved his hands as if to take the words back. “It’s just that you’re always so busy.”

“Ah, well, I haven’t done any recently… Oh no!”

“What is it?” Ayato blinked in surprise.

Sylvia propped her chin on her hand in embarrassment. “No. I just thought I could make lunch for you tomorrow, but today’s the last day…”

“Ah… That’s a shame.”

“Oh well. Let’s save it for next time.”

“Next time?” Ayato repeated.

Sylvia merely smiled mischievously back at him.

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Julis had been in a foul mood ever since she had woken up.

If even she could recognize it, she thought, it would have to be as plain as day to anyone else.

Given how famous she’d become, a huge number of visitors to the academy seemed about to call out to her as she made her way to the training room, but it took only one look at her expression for them all to reconsider.

The fact that they didn’t bother her should have been wonderful, but right now it was more irritating than anything else.

“Ah… Good morning, Julis.” Kirin bowed her head in greeting as she entered the training room.

“Why can’t this school fair just be over with?” Julis spat out abruptly. But she immediately came to her senses, lowering her voice in apology. “Sorry, Kirin. It’s just not working out for me right now.”

“It’s all right. I feel the same way.”

Kirin, it seemed, understood the cause of her frustration.

It was galling to have to admit it, but it all came down to the fact that Ayato and Sylvia were spending the entire school fair together.

Of course, Ayato had every right to spend his time wherever and with whomever he pleased. It wasn’t her place to interfere.

But even when she told herself that, she still couldn’t calm her nerves.

Sylvia Lyyneheym…

It went without saying that Sylvia was the most famous person in Asterisk. Her name was always listed in the top ten, even on the unofficial ranking sites Odhroerir and Hexa Pantheon.

Indeed, Julis had been keeping a close eye on her even before she had started getting involved with Ayato.

Sylvia was, after all, the only person—at least as far as she knew—to have been able to put up a good fight against Orphelia. While overall, their match might have been somewhat one-sided, for a short while, at least Sylvia had been able to counter Orphelia's abilities. For Julis, who understood firsthand just how powerful those abilities were, it was an astonishing performance.

Even if they hadn't met directly, Julis could make some broad guesses as to her personality based on how she had handled that match.

She hated having to admit it, but Sylvia had a very good approach to her matches. She respected her opponents, and she would face them head-on, without scheming against them in the background. The fact that she could do so might have been thanks to her versatile abilities and strengths, but Julis couldn't help but admire her for remaining true to herself even against Orphelia.

Based on all that, it was clear that she didn't have the personality to try to lead others into traps.

Which means she probably didn't have any ulterior motive in inviting Ayato to the fair…

Julis grabbed her head in her hands and let out a low groan as she came to that realization.

"J-Julis…?" Kirin called out cautiously, no doubt taken by surprise.

He might be a complete blockhead, but she's a world-famous idol. At this rate…

"Um, are you okay, Julis?" Kirin asked, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"—! Ah, I mean, I'm all right. Everything's fine." Julis cleared her throat, standing up straight as she came back to her senses. "By the way, um… Right. Isn't Saya coming today?"

"Oh yes… I think so. She went to an event run by the swimming club yesterday, so…"

"Ah, I heard that she went a little wild."

Saya was probably venting her feelings in her own way, Julis thought.

“A friend from the swimming club told me that she had used it as an opportunity to let off stress.”

Julis could tell that Kirin, hiding behind her grim smile, mustn’t have been particularly pleased with how her own training was going recently.

“By the way, Kirin…”

“Yes?”

“Um, I don’t know how to put this… Your shoes are on the wrong feet.”

“Huh?!”

“And your ribbon isn’t tied straight.”

“What?!”

“And your hair is loose. The right side looks like it’s about to come undone.”

“Wh-wh-wha—?!” Kirin squatted down where she stood, on the verge of tears.

Julis let out a tired sigh, then walked behind her and starting to put her hair in order. “Let me have a look. I can straighten it up for you, at least.”

“Th-thank you, Julis…”

“Saya probably has the right idea, letting her stress pour out rather than letting it build up inside like we are.”

“Yes… But still…” Kirin mustered her voice with a nod. “Because of that, the swimming club won’t let her take part in anything else. Where could she have gone today? I suppose there are other events going on… And she could have gone to one of the other schools…”

“I doubt it. Not with her sense of direction.”

At that moment, the training room door swung open.

“Well, speak of the devil.”

Saya, her expression sullen, strode through the entrance, followed a moment later by a beaming Claudia.

“Ah, excellent, we must have had the same idea.” She smiled.

“Oh, Claudia. Did you finish your work?”

“It’s about time I took a break. I thought we might all go to watch the event. I’ve already invited Miss Sasamiya, so why don’t we all go together?” Claudia pronounced, clapping her hands together.

“The event? You mean the one that Allekant and Jie Long are helping organize? The one that Ayato’s taking part in?”

“Exactly. But I’m afraid that it’s the clubs from the schools that have organized it. The student council hasn’t had any hand in it. We were of course given a rough idea of what to expect, but nothing more.”

“…”

Given that Ayato was going to participate, it wasn’t as if she hadn’t thought to go and watch it herself.

But she didn’t know whether she could honestly cheer him on given her present emotional state.

I’m not sulking. Really, I’m not sulking…

Claudia let out a soft laugh, as if reading her mind. “Some of the participants are also planning to take part in the Gryps. It might be a good way to gather some information, don’t you think?”

It was obvious that she was trying to encourage her to go, but now that she had put it that way, Julis couldn’t really refuse.

“…Sometimes you’re *too* shrewd, you know that?”

“Oh my, did I say something wrong?” Claudia replied sarcastically, as if pretending that she had no idea what Julis meant.

*

Appearance-wise, the Jie Long Seventh Institute was the most impressive of Asterisk’s six schools.

The grounds were filled with elaborate Chinese-style buildings, each of them connected by a labyrinthine network of adjoining galleries. The spaces between the buildings were filled with elegant landscapes and wide-open spaces, to the extent that visitors needed a map just to be able to find their way around.

“This place is amazing… It has to be the busiest of all of them,” Ayato marveled at Sylvia as they walked along together.

“Jie Long has more students than any of the other schools, but their traditions are different, too,” she replied.

“Their traditions?”

“Hmm… I don’t know whether to call it chaos or freedom… Anyway, their integrated enterprise foundation has always tended not to put too much pressure on them.”

Ayato glanced toward a large plaza. A number of students were busy controlling a dragon figure in an elaborate dance, with all manner of visitors thronging around them. In the garden at the opposite side of the gallery, a large knife-wielding man was doing some elaborate acrobatics to the cheers of a small crowd.

“Do you mean that they respect the students’ independence?”

“It’s more like the kind of people who chose to come to Jie Long are hoping to train to better themselves. Even the Festa comes second to that goal. Maybe that’s why it’s harder for their foundation to control them.”

“Ah, I see. So the Festa is just another avenue for training? I guess that means they don’t have any wishes they want granted?”

That reminded Ayato of Song and Luo, two of his opponents during the Phoenix. Those two were certainly that kind of student. If it was training itself that was their goal, that certainly explained why Jie Long’s martial artists were so strong.

“That might be the case for a lot of them, but there are people who have dreams of their own, too, just like at all the other schools.”

It sounded like firecrackers were going off all around them. There were all kinds of playful sounds echoing across the institute grounds. Given that Jie Long was the only one of Asterisk’s six academies that had an elementary school, there were also a large number of young children playfully running around.

“On top of that, the institute isn’t particularly unified, for better or for worse. There are several different factions for each of the martial arts, each of them more or less independent.”

“Doesn’t that go for Allekant, too?”

“No. Over there, the research budgets of the various factions come directly from their foundation… But I suppose that there is a bureaucratic side to Jie Long, too. The student council, at least, is very close to their IEF.”

“I see…”

Ayato glanced toward a hall that looked a lot like a dojo, where

a dozen or so students were all performing some kind of dance in perfect unison.

He could see why Jie Long always did so well at the Festa—not only did they have a higher number of students than the other schools; they had many more students who were interested in combat.

"By the way, Ayato, you have a distinctive hand-to-hand fighting style, right? You know, the one you used when you fought against Kirin Toudou?"

"Well, the Amagiri Shinmei style does have some techniques for that kind of situation. But you know, you aren't half bad yourself," Ayato said, remembering the first time they had met, when she had defeated a former Jie Long Page One in a single move.

Sylvia puffed out her chest. "Even I don't neglect my training."

"But it looked like you know your way around real combat. What school was it?"

"Hmm… I don't know what it's called exactly or where it came from. And I was only taught the basics. The rest of it is my own style. Do you remember my music teacher whom I mentioned yesterday? She's the one who taught me."

"…Your music teacher?"

Ayato startled for a moment, but when he thought about it, if she had participated in the Eclipse, she would have to be quite strong.

"Ah, but I think she said once that it had something to do with the Vikings…"

They turned around a corner, when—

"—?!"

"Wha—?!"

The mana surrounding them began to writhe uncontrollably, the scenery around them seemingly melting like wax.

The two of them braced themselves for trouble but suddenly found themselves standing in a great hall.

"What's going on…?"

There was a sudden burst of laughter. "Hoh-hoh, my apologies for that. I didn't want to cause a scene, you see." A young girl, her hair arranged into a shape like the wings of a butterfly, emerged from behind a pillar.

She looked to be around the same age as Flora. Based on the fact that she was wearing a Jie Long uniform, Ayato concluded she

had to be a student.

"Oh… It's you. Don't surprise me like that, Xinglou," Sylvia said, lowering her guard.

"It's been a while, Miss Diva."

Ayato, however, could barely take in what Sylvia had just said. "Xinglou…? Xinglou Fan?!"

Xinglou Fan, Jie Long's top-ranked fighter and student council president and the current Immanent Heaven—Ban'yuu Tenra.

He had heard about her, of course, but he had never suspected that she would be so young. After all, there were hardly any videos of her matches, and while he wouldn't go so far as to say that she was purposefully hiding from the public, he had heard that she often sent representatives to public events instead of attending them in person. There was little wonder that he hadn't recognized her.

"Indeed, I am Xinglou Fan. I'm pleased to finally meet you, Ayato Amagiri. I've taken quite an interest in you."

"Ah… Me too." He still didn't understand what was going on, but he accepted her outstretched hand all but reflexively.

"You truly were splendid in the Phoenix. Just thinking about it makes my heart race. But it's such a pity. Why didn't you attend Jie Long?"

"Well, um… I mean… More importantly, how did you bring us over here?"

He had been about to ask her how she had recognized them, given that they were still disguised, but that was hardly the most pressing issue at hand.

"Shortening the earth vein and connecting great distances—a technique called bridging. Or rather, an application of it."

"You mean teleportation? So Seisenjutsu can do that, too…"

He would have to come up with some kind of countermeasure, Ayato thought.

"It isn't Seisenjutsu." Xinglou shook her head slowly.

But in that case, what on earth could it be?

"There's no use worrying about it, Ayato." Sylvia shrugged, clearly resigned to their situation. "I'm sure it's the same at all the other schools, too, but there's something that incoming student council presidents at Queenvale are always told. If Jie Long's representative is the Ban'yuu Tenra, then don't get involved with her, no matter what."

Xinglou let out a pleased laugh. "Hoh-hoh, that's the first time

I've heard that. No matter what, you say?"

"Yes…" Sylvia let out a long, deep sigh. "I don't know how true they are, but according to the rumors, she's already over a thousand years old."

"A thousand years old… That's…"

Even if she did have some kind of ability, that would mean she would have been alive since long before the Invertia. Given that Genestella only began to appear in the world as an effect of the manadite that had come to Earth during that time, there was no way it could be true.

"Oh? You don't believe it?" Folding her arms, Xinglou glanced up at him, clearly disappointed by his reaction.

"I mean—"

"Never mind. Now that you've finally paid us a visit, allow me to enlighten you as to how this world works."

And with that, the room fell into darkness.

"—!"

"There's no need to worry. It's just… Ah yes, it's just what you might call a hologram."

"A hologram…?"

A semitransparent projection of the Earth hovered up before them.

The planet was rotating slowly, peacefully—until, all of a sudden, countless meteorites began to appear, plummeting downward one after another.

"Is this…?"

"Precisely. The Invertia."

"But this is… These meteorites—it looks like they just popped up around it, out of nowhere…"

"Indeed…," Sylvia muttered.

Xinglou nodded enthusiastically. "You're all taught that not a single astronomical observatory had predicted the Invertia, no?"

Even now, the Invertia was still shrouded in mystery, but there was at least a general consensus that it had been fundamentally different from every other recorded meteorite shower.

"Are you really saying it happened without any warning?"

"Why don't I show you how these meteorites look to us?" Xinglou continued, ignoring Sylvia's question.

She clicked her fingers, and the hologram began to zoom toward the planet, looking down on the surface from above.

A gigantic meteorite entered the image, slamming into the Earth's surface.

"Wha…?"

"It can't be…"

Neither of them could believe their eyes.

Inside the meteor, a sparkling multilayered magic circle was unfolding.

It was on an entirely different scale, but in appearance at least, it looked just like the kind of magic circle that appeared whenever Stregas or Dantes used their abilities.

And when the circle disappeared, everything that should have laid inside it was gone, as if completely gouged out of the planet's surface.

"It appears to have converted the energy from the impact into some sort of technique. It probably converted everything within a certain range."

"Converted… But where did it go?"

"Not even I know that. We call it the other world," Xinglou said, her mouth twisting into a broad grin. "You must be taught this as well, no? That if it were an ordinary meteorite, the material gouged out from the impact should have been flung into the atmosphere, where it could have been easily observed? It wasn't. This is why."

Ayato couldn't help but nod. Judging by the scale of those meteorites, the calamity should have left all humanity facing extinction.

"The Invertia was no natural disaster. It was caused intentionally by someone."

"That's…"

Anyone who had that kind of power would have to be some kind of god, and Ayato shuddered.

"Well, that isn't important. No matter who did it, or why, they don't have anything to do with us now," Xinglou said plainly.

"…Huh?"

Then why had she told them about it?

"My point is this. If someone caused the Invertia, there's no reason to assume that it was particularly unique."

"Are you saying it could happen again?"

"It could. But what I mean is the opposite."

Ayato, all at once, understood. If that was the case, then

something similar could have happened in the past as well.

"Of course, nothing to the extent of the Invertia. That surprised us, too. But that wasn't the first time that mana and manadite have been brought to the Earth. They've been here for a long time, just not to the extent that they are now."

"…And Genestella, too," Ayato murmured.

Xinglou gave him a short nod. "They were given a lot of names. Wizards, witches, sages."

"…It sounds too large-scale. It doesn't make sense," Sylvia muttered uneasily.

Xinglou broke into a loud cackle. "You can believe what you like. Even knowing the truth, it won't change anything for you."

Sylvia seemed taken aback at first but soon regained her composure. "You're right, of course. But what I'm more interested in is why someone a thousand years old would be trying to pass themselves off as a student."

Xinglou's eyes narrowed dangerously. "…*Why*, you ask?"

At that moment, an overbearing sense of intimidation swept over them, a kind of power that seemed to be strong enough to tear through skin, smash bones, and crush organs.

This is just like Commander Lindwall said…

Helga Lindwall, the commander of the city guard, had once warned Ayato that both Orphelia Landlufen and Xinglou Fan existed *on a whole other plane* than everyone else at Asterisk. Now that he had encountered both of them, it was clear she hadn't been exaggerating.

"Isn't it obvious? What I want is to fight strong opponents." Xinglou smiled joyfully. "This world is wonderful, overflowing with promising young material. But unless that material is properly cultivated, there's no use at all in its existence. So I volunteer my services to teach them how I can."

"So you tend to the livestock so that you can have your fill, is that it?" Sylvia demanded, squaring off against her. A bead of sweat trickled down her forehead.

Ayato couldn't help but be impressed by her courage in the face of that overpowering aura.

"Ah-ha, very good, Miss Diva." Xinglou laughed with unbridled amusement. "I don't normally like eating before a meal…but when it smells so good, I can only endure so much." There was a threatening glint lurking deep in her eyes.

But at that moment—

"Master, the preparations for the airship are complete… Wh-what are you doing?!"

A panicked voice rang throughout the hall from its entrance.

The overpowering sensation that had been flowing over them disappeared without a trace.

"Ah, Hufeng. It's a good thing you're here. I was about to lose my patience."

"Please, master, leave your personal quarrels for after the fair. If something were to happen, even you wouldn't escape the consequences."

"I understand. My apologies, Miss Diva. It looks like I went a little too far."

"Not at all. I knew you weren't being serious."

The two of them exchanged amused smiles.

"…Master, who are our guests…?" The boy, whom Ayato had at first mistaken for a girl, was staring at the two of them with a perplexed expression.

Huh…? Isn't he Jie Long's—?

"Seidoukan's and Queenvale's number one fighters," Xinglou said. "If I'm not mistaken."

"What…?" The boy's mouth dropped open in surprise.

Ayato and Sylvia glanced at each other, before removing their disguises.

The boy continued to stare at them for a short moment, until shocked recognition spread across his face.

"Whaaaaaat?! Wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you doing here, Sylvia?!"

"Ah yes. Ayato Amagiri, you were going to the Gran Colosseo, weren't you?" asked Xinglou, completely ignoring the boy. "We were just about to go there ourselves. Why don't you come with us?" Without even waiting for a response, she grabbed him by the hand and began to drag him along.

"W-wait…!"

"Don't go deciding things all on your own!" Sylvia ran after them. "Ayato is still on a date with me!"

Xinglou, however, paid her no attention. "Hurry up, Hufeng," she called after the boy. "How long do you plan to stand there?"

"…Ah! O-of course!" he exclaimed as he regained his senses and took off after them. "Forgive me!"

“It’s time for the main event.” Xinglou laughed joyfully as she continued to pull Ayato through the corridor. “Let’s hope that they found some good material.”

CHAPTER 6
THE GRAN COLOSSEO

Airships weren't an uncommon means of transportation in Asterisk. Having been miniaturized from their traditional counterparts thanks to the science of meteoric engineering, they could take off and land from any open space the size of a heliport.

They were, however, mainly targeted to tourists and were seldom used by students. The only exceptions were probably the members of the various student councils when they wanted to avoid the usual traffic congestion on their way to the central district.

Such as right now.

"Ah, sorry for not introducing myself sooner… I-I'm Hufeng Zhao. I'm Jie Long's student council secretary."

"You're the Peerless Thorn, the Tenka Musou, right?" Sylvia asked. "I've heard about you, too, of course. And you came to one of my concerts, didn't you?"

"Huh? H-how do you…?"

Sylvia smiled. "I try to look at the face of every person who attends my concerts. Of course, I can't remember everyone, though."

The boy—Hufeng—blushed. "I-I'm honored!"

Ayato had heard of Hufeng Zhao as well. He was currently ranked number seven at Jie Long and had been a runner-up in the Phoenix four years ago. At the moment, however, he looked just like any other of Sylvia's fans.

"My apologies. He does love Miss Diva." Xinglou, sitting directly across from Ayato, laughed.

The airship, decorated with a painted dragon, seemed quite

small from the outside, but it was surprisingly spacious. It could probably hold a maximum of ten passengers. The interior was decorated in an oriental design like one would expect from Jie Long but also fitted with large viewing windows along the sides, so that they could overlook the city below.

"By the way, um…"

"Call me Xinglou. You aren't my student, so there's no need for formalities."

"Okay, Xinglou. Are you taking part in this event, too?"

"No. I've only been involved in the management. Hufeng will take part in my stead."

Hufeng, who until now had been in high spirits, knit his brows. "I didn't want to, but my master insisted…"

Unlike Xinglou, Hufeng seemed to be quite earnest, so he probably always had something to worry about thanks to her.

"But it should be a good opportunity to observe the Murakumo up close and personally, so if I do have to participate, I'll make the most of it," he said, staring at Ayato defiantly.

His eyes glowed with the distinctive passion of a trained warrior.

"There was also a last-minute addition, a special guest."

"A special guest?"

"Pendragon."

"Pendragon…?" Ayato startled. "From Gallardworth…?"

Xinglou nodded. "There isn't anyone here in Rikka who can match him in swordsmanship. Then again, if that young lady from Seidoukan were a little older, who knows how it would turn out?"

"Oh, so Ernest will be making an appearance, too…" Sylvia trailed off, as if lost in thought. "Xinglou, is registration still open?"

"Huh…? Sylvie?"

"S-Sylvia?!"

Ayato's and Hufeng's faces both blanched at the unexpected question.

Xinglou, however, leaned forward, letting out a burst of laughter. "Aren't you the eager one, Miss Diva."

"This is a rare opportunity, after all."

"Good, good. I'm afraid it's closed already, but leave it to me. I'll ensure that a spot will open. Although I doubt that anyone would be foolish enough to try to stop Sylvia Lyyneheym from joining in on the fun."

Xinglou beamed, taking out her mobile device.

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"*Ladies and gentlemen!*" Eishirou's voice echoed through the Sirius Dome to a tremendous roar of excited cheers that rivaled even the Festa. "*Thank you all for waiting! I hope that you've all been enjoying the school fair. To those of you who think you've had enough, and to those of you who still want more, I guarantee you that today's event will be the highlight of these past three days! It's finally time to open the Gran Colosseo!*"

The participants were already gathered on the stage.

No sooner had the airship landed than Ayato, Sylvia, and Hufeng were each handed a Lux and shown to the stage with the other participants.

There were thirty-one of them in total. Nobody, it seemed, had been told what would happen next.

"*This is Eishirou Yabuki, of Seidoukan Academy's newspaper club, covering this joint event from three of our great schools. Welcome!*" Eishirou, standing in the commentary box, announced in high spirits.

He seemed to have quite a talent for live commentary, Ayato thought, considering that it wasn't his usual line of work.

"Yo, Amagiri," came a familiar voice from behind his shoulder. "You still sporting that dumb look, huh? Not what I was expecting from the champion of the Phoenix."

"It's been a while, hasn't it, Irene? You look as energetic as ever."

"Yeah, you think so? Thanks to you, the Gravisheath's a piece of junk. I'm down to eighteen in the rankings now."

She might have been feigning anger, but the fact that she could maintain even that position without the Gravisheath was no doubt thanks to her great physical abilities. Having fought against her himself, Ayato knew that her idiosyncratic fighting style was in no way inferior to those of the people ranked higher than her at Jie Long.

"Right, I heard that you came to visit us this afternoon. That you brought a woman with you. You're quite something, huh?" she added with a smirk.

"Ah, that's…"

Priscilla must have told her.

But in that case, how could he explain himself?

"*Each and every contender in today's Gran Colosseo was strictly screened from the ranked lists of each academy! Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce our esteemed guests! Let's start with the name most fresh in your minds, the champion of the Phoenix, Seidoukan Academy's top-ranked fighter, heir to an ancient school of swordsmanship, the Murakumo, Ayato Amagiri!*"

And with that, the spotlights all swung toward him, forcing him to narrow his eyes to see through the glare.

At the exact same moment, a wave of cheers erupted all around him, the crowd's passion washing over him.

"*Next up is Gallardworth's very own Pendragon! The man who led the Silverwinged Knights to victory in the last two Gryps, Gallardworth's top-ranked fighter, a knight among knights with whom the Runesword fell in love at first sight, Ernest Fairclough!*"

The spotlights turned to Ayato's right, illuminating a handsome young man in a Gallardworth uniform with his hand raised lightly to the crowd.

That was all it took for a burst of high-pitched squeals to descend upon the stage.

He was clearly popular with women, Ayato mused.

"*And now, next on our list, an unexpectedly late entry into the competition, our peerless songstress, the world's top idol, Queenvale's top-ranked fighter and runner-up at the Lindvolus, the woman with the most enchanting voice in the world, our Sigrdrífa, Sylvia Lyyneheym!*"

This time, the spotlights moved to the left, and an explosion of cheers completely surpassing those given for Ayato and Ernest flooded the Sirius Dome.

Or rather than cheers, Ayato thought, they were more like wild screams.

"A-amazing…"

"What were you expecting? She *is* the world's most famous singer," Irene sputtered, her expression showing a complete lack of interest in her. "I'm more interested in *him*," she continued, glancing toward Hufeng, who was doing some warm-up exercises by the wall. "I thought of going back to hand-to-hand combat, you know? But Jie Long's fighting styles are far too logical. Like, in the way they use their prana. And he's one of the best at that."

"Oh? So you've seen him fight in person?"

The flow of a person's mana and prana was all but impossible to sense just by watching a recording.

Ayato had seen videos of Hufeng's matches, and the impression that he had received was that his speed was completely out of the ordinary.

In fact, he might have been faster than anyone he had ever seen before.

"Well, duh… Looks like we're finally up to the explanation."

"*With that out of the way, the Gran Colosseo has so far been described only as a field simulation battle, so allow me to explain the rules! I'm sure that our contestants are dying to know as well!*"

The Sirius Dome seemed to be at maximum capacity despite the vague publicity. Perhaps, Ayato mused, fanning the flames of people's curiosity had worked in the event's favor.

Events that took place in the Sirius Dome had to be approved by Asterisk's City Council. That required a considerable amount of funding, so if there were any question about the plans, there was no way it would have gotten to this point.

Moreover, the fact that it was taking place in the Sirius Dome on the last day of the school fair would no doubt be seen by many visitors as proof of its worth.

"*First of all, the Gran Colosseo is organized into three parts. Contenders who satisfy the conditions of each phase will proceed into the next one. Those who fail will be disqualified.*"

"Satisfy the conditions, huh…? It almost sounds like a game."

"Seriously, you're too naive. They're saying this whole thing was organized by Ferrovius's vice-chair."

Ferrovius was the largest of Allekant's many warring factions, headed by Camilla Pareto.

"They're apparently in the middle of a dispute over Pareto's successor or something. This whole thing seems to be designed for them all to show off their research."

There was no arguing that it was hard to believe that they had gone to this much effort for the sake of pure entertainment.

"Well, that's enough friendly chat. Let's do our best, yeah?" Irene said, departing with a wave.

A huge air-window opened above the stage listing all the conditions described by Eishirou.

"*And most importantly, the Gran Colosseo is not a battle royal! Fighting between participants is expressly forbidden, so anyone who*

intentionally attacks another contender will be automatically disqualified. Furthermore, in the pursuit of fairness, all contestants can use only the Luxes prepared for them by the organizers."

"So that's what this is for," Ayato thought aloud, glancing at the blade-type Lux that he had been given.

That meant that he couldn't use the Ser Veresta. It made sense, though: No matter what the conditions were, there was no arguing that the other contestants would be at a disadvantage if he used it.

"*It's also expressly forbidden for Stregas and Dantes to use their abilities—although there's only one person to whom that should apply.*"

That person, of course, would be Sylvia.

It sounded like the organizers wanted the tournament to be about physical ability and technique only.

The "strict screening" Eishirou mentioned probably weeded out all the Stregas and Dantes, Ayato guessed.

In that case, Xinglou might have had to put some pressure on the management to allow Sylvia to take part, although her name value no doubt played a role in convincing them to let her enter.

"*But that's enough introduction! Let's get started with the first phase!*"

No sooner had Eishirou finished speaking than the floodlights cut out, and countless glowing shapes began to descend toward the stage from above.

"Are those Rect Luxes…?"

Countless swords with blades of blinding light and large gun-shaped devices came to a stop in midair, floating above the stage. There must have been at least a hundred of them.

It was impossible to tell how many people were controlling them, but whoever they were, they must have been hiding somewhere out of sight.

"*Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, these are the newly developed Luxes that I'm sure you've all heard so much about! To clear this phase, our contestants will have to make it past them!*"

The Rect Luxes, jointly developed by Allekant and Seidoukan and which Julis had been testing as a monitor, had been officially announced at the end of last year.

As such, only students of those two academies currently had access to them, but it was expected that they would eventually spread to the other schools, too.

"…Heh, so the first phase is supposed to be a demonstration,

huh?"

Irene seemed to have hit the nail on the head. There was no doubt a lot of expectation riding on their performance.

"*To satisfy the conditions, each contestant will have to destroy a target terminal within the time limit. The target terminals are colored red, instead of the usual green. There are twenty in total and thirty-one participants, which means that at least eleven people will have to drop out here.*"

Just as Eishirou had said, there were a number of red terminals mixed in with the green ones.

"*Moreover, unlike in the Festa, in this first phase all our contestants will fight alongside one another. Contestants, if you are hit by an attack, you will be immediately disqualified, no matter how light the damage, so be sure to keep your eyes open!*"

That, Ayato thought, was an incredibly severe condition.

The organizers clearly had the advantage. The stage was set up in such a way that it would all but force the contestants into a melee, and they couldn't risk hitting any of the others.

"*Contestants, are you all ready? Then let the first phase begin!*"

No sooner had Eishirou finished speaking than the Rect Luxes snapped into movement, surrounding the stage from all sides.

Ayato sighed. "*Haah*… I don't like being someone's plaything, but I guess I have no choice."

He released his seal, and at that moment bullets of light began to speed toward him from all directions. The sword-type Luxes needled their way toward every available opening, getting ready to strike downward from the air above.

However…

…for Ayato, who had entered the state of *shiki*, dodging those attacks was no trouble at all.

No matter how many of them there were, weapons were, after all, only as competent as their user. And from what he could see, whoever was controlling the Rect Luxes didn't seem to be as strong as Julis.

He scanned his surroundings for a target, all the while dodging the endless stream of bullets and sword strikes that came his way. It didn't take long for him to find one.

The target terminal wasn't joining in on the onslaught. Instead, it hung back behind a wall of its companions. After a short moment, it seemed to realize that Ayato had it fixed in his sights and sped

into the mass of green Luxes as if to escape.

"Oh no you don't!"

His own Lux ready, Ayato intercepted one of the endless bullets of light that were coming his way, changing its trajectory with the force of the impact. The attack scored a direct hit, the target losing its balance and plunging toward the ground.

The remaining Luxes seemed to intensify their attacks, but Ayato leaped toward the fallen one, destroying its handle with a stroke of his sword.

"*Well, that* was *fast! Contestant Amagiri has cleared the first phase within the first minute!*"

"Phew…" Ayato let out a sigh of relief to the cheers of the crowd, retreating to the corner of the stage.

"Very impressive, Amagiri," came the voice of a young man who had similarly parted from the battle.

It looked like Ernest Fairclough had also wasted little time passing the first phase.

Ayato let out a soft laugh. "Ha-ha, it's an honor to be praised by Asterisk's finest swordsman."

"Oh no, I'm afraid I'm not that impressive… It's a pleasure to meet you. Although I believe we saw each other during the award ceremony after the Phoenix."

Ayato accepted Ernest's outstretched hand.

He would never have expected that he might shake the hands of two top-ranked fighters in the same day.

"I've heard that your school of swordsmanship focuses on fighting against multiple opponents simultaneously. You must be pretty good at dealing with this kind of situation."

"Well, I suppose so. Gallardworth focuses on one-on-one fighting, however."

"It's developed out of dueling techniques rather than battlefield ones, right?"

Given that Ernest was Gallardworth's student council president, Ayato had expected him to be more formal, but he was surprisingly relaxed. He looked slightly older that Ayato, probably around twenty years old.

Ernest was still gripping his hand, staring intently at Ayato's face.

"Um…? Is something wrong?"

"No, forgive me. Actually, I've wanted to speak with you for a

while now. But I suppose this isn't the best time or place." Ernest released his hand, flashing him a friendly smile.

"Someone else said the same thing just a short while ago… Jie Long's student council president."

Ernest chuckled. "Ha-ha. You *must* be the real thing if the princess herself has taken an interest in you."

"But there's something about her that I just can't understand…"

But before Ayato could finish, Sylvia appeared beside them, making no effort to hide her displeasure.

"Hmph. So these are Rect Luxes? They're not what I was expecting."

She didn't seem particularly impressed by them.

"Oh, Miss Lyyneheym. So you *do* know Mr. Amagiri?"

"Well, yeah. What do you mean?"

"You did both come to Gallardworth yesterday, didn't you?"

"…So you noticed?"

Ayato and Sylvia exchanged measured glances.

They had indeed gone to Gallardworth the previous afternoon, but it had seemed like the most peaceful of all six of the Asterisk's schools. Nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, certainly nothing to make them think anyone had seen through their disguises.

"I have a friend with very sharp eyes."

"Ah, I get it. That girl who was dressed like a boy?" Sylvia exclaimed, raising a hand to her forehead as if to hide her embarrassment.

"Our vice president was quite concerned to learn that Queenvale's and Seidoukan's top-ranked fighters had come together, but it looks like it was nothing to worry about."

"Well, it was only a date. Right, Ayato?"

"Ah…"

"Oh, I must say I'm jealous."

The three of them continued to talk for a while, until a loud buzzer sounded through the arena.

"*And that's the end of the first phase!*"

They all turned back to the stage at the sound of Eishirou's voice. Most of the Rect Luxes seemed to have disappeared.

The number of remaining contestants was lower than Ayato had expected.

But it was something else that had him concerned.

So the first phase went on for fifteen minutes… If the other two go

on for that long, too…

He was able to break the seal that Haruka had put on his powers for longer than he once could, but the total amount of time was still little more than an hour. If the event went on any longer than that, he might not be able to last.

"*Fifteen of our participants have passed through the first phase, and just over half have dropped out! Those of you who have been disqualified, please leave the stage immediately!*"

The crowd gave muted applause to the disqualified contestants as they left the stage, shoulders slumped in disappointment.

Among the remaining contestants were Hufeng and Irene, and the others all looked to be fairly capable as well.

Even taking the strict conditions into account, given that all the contestants were ranked fighters, their numbers had been reduced by half was already an indicator of the Rect Luxes' potential.

"*Now then, my apologies to our contestants, but time is short, so let's move on at once to the second phase of the Gran Colosseo!*"

As Eishirou fell silent, an entrance gate at the opposite side of the arena swung open, a huge shadow slowly emerging.

"Is that…a Puppet?" Ayato whispered.

At first glance, the huge frame, wrapped in an imposing set of heavy armor, seemed to resemble the autonomous battle puppets that Ayato and company had fought in the Phoenix. Its body and shape, however, were larger than Ardy's, and it was hard to say that it looked particularly elegant.

Behind the first came another, and another, and another.

"No, they look like powered combat suits," Ernest corrected him.

In that case, there would have to be people inside them.

"*The conditions of the second phase are the opposite of the first. Those contestants who can evade the attacks of these new powered combat suits will be able to move onto the final phase. Contestants, you are of course free to fight back. However, like last time, you will be disqualified if you take a hit, so be careful!*"

Eishirou might have called the conditions the opposite of those of the first phase, but in practice, they weren't all that much different.

"Hmm… Looks like there are twenty of them," Sylvia murmured.

There were more powered suits than remaining contestants.

“They probably wanted to make sure that they at least matched however many of us passed the last round.”

“Looks like it.”

The organizers, it seemed, had put a lot of thought into it.

“*Phase Two—begin!*”

At Eishirou’s announcement, one of the powered suits leaped to the forefront of the pack, charging toward the stage.

“Heh… This is a surprise.” Ernest’s voice was filled with admiration.

Judging from their appearance, even Ayato hadn’t thought they’d be able to move particularly fast, but their speed belied all expectation.

The contestant closest to the charging suit raised their sword to meet its attack.

A glowing blade just like that of the contestant’s Lux emerged from the powered suit’s right arm, colliding with the contestant’s sword with a bright flash—and to everyone’s surprise sent the contestant flying across the arena. The strength of the suits, it seemed, wasn’t to be underestimated.

As the contestant fell to the ground, a barrage of glowing bullets rained down. It looked like the suits came equipped with both kinds of armament.

“*It looks like we’re already down one contestant! How many will make it through to the final phase?*”

“These guys look tough,” Sylvia said over her shoulder just as several of the powered suits began coming her way.

But before Ayato could ready his Lux, she took a step forward, placing a hand on his. “Ladies first,” she said with a wink.

She was grasping a regular rapier-type Lux in her right hand.

“I’m not particularly used to it, but I’ll manage.”

She usually wielded a bayonet-type Lux in her matches. The sword was quite a bit larger, so it would no doubt be harder to control.

Nonetheless, she stepped straight into the powered suit’s path without even the slightest hesitation.

The first powered suit paused in momentary confusion. It looked like there was indeed someone controlling it from the inside.

However, it quickly assumed a fighting stance, lunging out with its blade in a horizontal slash.

Sylvia managed to dodge it without any apparent difficulty,

driving her own weapon down toward the suit's body. However—

"Oh dear… It's stronger than I thought."

Her attack should have plunged right through it, but it left no more than a slight dent. It might as well have caused no damage at all.

If the attack had failed, then their Luxes would probably be of no use piercing their armor.

"…I guess this is what they were planning from the beginning, making us use these Luxes," Ayato pondered aloud.

As far as Luxes went, they seemed stronger than average, but if the event was meant as a demonstration, it made sense for the organizers to try to make the contest as one-sided as possible.

"That's a dirty trick." Ernest, staring at his own Lux with distaste, must have realized what was going on, too.

"If that's how it is, we're going to need some better ideas," Sylvia said, jumping back while the powered suit fired off a barrage of glowing bullets.

The suit spun around as it tried to land a shot on her, when—

"…Looks like you need to work on your rhythm."

Sylvia's sword flashed brilliantly, the powered suit going limp before crashing to its knees.

Astonishment and confusion emanated from it. The person inside probably hadn't even realized what had happened.

Sylvia had struck at its joints.

While that was the usual approach to dealing with heavy armor, the powered suits seemed to have been designed to withstand such attacks by constantly adjusting their shielding.

Sylvia, however, had aimed for the precise moment that its shielding was adjusting before making her attack.

"I would have expected no less from Miss Lyyneheym. But I'm going to lose face, if she takes care of them all without even using her abilities." Ernest, activating his own Lux, glanced toward Ayato. "Let me handle this, as an act of courtesy to your senior," he said, turning to face a pair of oncoming powered suits.

"Uh, I'll take the other one…," Ayato began, when Ernest flashed him a meaningful grin. "All right, I'll leave it all to you. I guess…"

Having been preempted yet again, he could do little but stand back and watch.

Ernest stepped forward, two of the powered suits preparing to

catch him in the middle of a pincer attack—standard tactics for a two-against-one fight.

Ernest, however, showed no sign of preparing to attack. He hadn't even raised his sword to defend himself. To a casual observer, he would have seemed to have left himself completely open, but it was clear to Ayato that his blade was lying dormant beneath that facade of defenselessness.

Then, at the very moment that the two powered suits stepped forward, both of their right arms were blown away in a terrible explosion.

"*Wh-what on earth was that?! The powered suits confronting contestant Fairclough just lost their arms!*" Eishirou cried over the loudspeaker.

Ayato, however, who quickly understood just what Ernest had done, was even more surprised. "What was all that about losing face?" he muttered.

Ernest had waited for the very moment before the two powered suits activated their Luxes and attacked with his own blade just as they had begun to materialize.

And both of them at the exact same time.

If his timing had been off by even a fraction of a second, he would have been blocked by their shielding, or else clashed blade to blade. Ayato had his doubts that even Kirin could move that fast.

"Looks like he isn't called Asterisk's best swordsman for nothing…"

But the most amazing thing of all was that neither Sylvia nor Ernest seemed to be breaking a sweat.

Watching them fight, Ayato felt a shiver run down his spine.

He couldn't afford to dawdle, however, raising his sword to defend himself against an oncoming powered suit.

*

"I-impossible! There's no way…!"

Narcisse Perroy, vice president of Allekant Académie's Ferrovius faction and the manager of the Gran Colosseo Organizing Committee, watched in stunned confusion in the Sirius Dome's special viewing lounge.

On the stage beneath him, the second phase of the competition had already ended, with five contestants left standing.

Narcisse hadn't expected any of them to pass.

He had planned the Gran Colosseo from the very beginning as a way of bolstering his own influence inside Ferrovius.

The event was supposed to have been arranged in conjunction with Seidoukan's Society for the Study of Meteoric Engineering, which was helping to develop the new Luxes, with the express purpose of demonstrating the capabilities of Seidoukan's Rect Luxes and Allekant's powered suits.

From the very beginning, it was meant to have been held in a smaller venue.

But then—

The girl—Xinglou—let out an innocent burst of laughter. "What a splendid charade! I guess those ill-formed playthings can only do so much."

Narcisse glared back at her.

I-it's all her fault! It only started to fall apart once this kid started getting involved!

Xinglou had first contacted him around six months ago.

He had had no idea how she'd heard about the event, but she had said she wanted to make a contribution.

Narcisse had taken little interest in the offer at first, but when he realized that she could take care of the financial side of things, he decided to hear her out.

And besides, Jie Long possessed all kinds of interesting technologies that he wanted to get his hands on. Even Tenorio had been unable to reproduce their prized Seisenjutsu despite devoting years of research to it. If things went well, Narcisse had thought, maybe he would be able to get his hands on at least some aspect of it.

But as soon as Xinglou had been added to the organizing committee, things had started getting out of hand. She began to gather many more participants than anyone had intended; commandeered the Sirius Dome for the last day of the school fair; and before anyone else had realized it, the total amount of prize money had jumped to over ten times what they had originally planned. And then, without even being told what she intended to do with it, she had tricked Narcisse into reluctantly yielding control over the third phase to her.

What was more, due to the fact that Allekant's media organizations were less developed than the other schools', they had

entrusted every aspect of the publicity and advertising to Seidoukan—which then went so far as to nominate the winner of the Phoenix as an entrant.

And then, on the very day of the event, Ernest Fairclough and Sylvia Lyyneheym had been allowed to participate, proving once and for all that it had now spun entirely out of his control.

But while everything had happened contrary to his expectations, Narcisse had still thought he had a chance of coming out on top.

Even the likes of Ayato Amagiri and Ernest Fairclough wouldn't be able to do anything if their weapons didn't work, he had reasoned. Which was why he had made sure that the output of their Luxes had been set so that, even if they were to use Meteor Arts, they would have no hope of penetrating the armoring that protected his powered suits.

Given that Stregas and Dantes were meant to have been barred from participating, the fact that Sylvia had been allowed to enter made his blood run cold—but even that shouldn't have been a problem so long as she wasn't allowed to use her abilities. Rather, if his creations could hold a number one in check—even if she was fighting with a handicap—that would make for the best kind of demonstration. At least that had been the plan.

But now…

"It must be such a shame, Mister Manager, watching your much-vaunted toys get beaten around like that."

"It… It wasn't supposed to be like this! My powered suits are far superior to Ernesta's Puppets…! Far superior…!"

Indeed, his powered suits, armed with every resource at his disposal and driven by real humans, ought to have been far superior to that absurd attempt to grant self-awareness to lifeless dolls.

It had been a mistake for Ferrovius—no, for Camilla—to team up with Pygmalion. All he had to do was prove he was the better researcher, and he would be made the faction's next president. He was sure of it. That was how it had been supposed to play out.

"All you think about are numbers. You'll never understand. But it's no concern of mine. Don't let me drag you from your ivory tower." Xinglou jumped down from her chair and headed toward the door.

"Wh-where are you going…?"

"The third phase is mine. I'm going to find a closer vantage

point.” Her voice was filled with the unbridled excitement of a child.

“W-wait…! Give me one more chance! We still have more suits. If we use them in the third phase—” Narcisse only got so far before his mouth seemed to freeze in place.

“…Think before you open your mouth, fool. Give you a chance, you say?”

“—!”

The overpowering aura rising out of Xinglou left Narcisse petrified, unable to move so much as a finger. Fear so strong that it seemed to be clenching his heart in a fist had taken hold of him. He couldn’t breathe, let alone muster his voice to respond.

But then—

“From where I’m standing, you both look like fools.”

A voice suddenly echoed down the corridor, and a woman who Narcisse had never seen before strode into the room.

Her hooded robe hid her figure and eyes to such an extent that he could identify her as a woman only from her voice. The special viewing room was supposed to be restricted to VIPs only, so she shouldn't have been able to enter without passing the guards, who couldn't possibly have let such a suspicious character through without contacting him first. Realizing what that meant only added fuel to his already panicked state.

"Hmm… And you are?" Xinglou, glancing toward their intruder with a quizzical expression, didn't seem to have any idea who she was, either.

The woman let out a small sigh before removing her robe.

She looked to be in her midtwenties. She was beautiful, with well-defined features; her plain clothing coiled around her like a simple drape of cloth, emphasizing the contours of her body.

"Mm… No, I don't believe we've met." Xinglou, her head tilted to the side, stared at the woman's face—before her gaze fell to the woman's chest. "Oh! I see. *That's a lovely body you've taken for yourself.*"

"That should be my line."

Narcisse had no idea what the two of them were talking about. Following Xinglou's gaze, his attention was drawn to a disproportionately large necklace around the woman's neck. It was no normal necklace—looking instead like some kind of machine, with a huge gemstone set in the center like the eye of a monster.

"So, what brings you all the way out here?" Xinglou asked, her arms crossed.

Instead of answering, the woman headed straight across the room, all the way to the huge window overlooking the stage. "… You don't normally make public appearances, so I thought I would try to invite you to join us again."

"No matter how many times you ask, my answer will be the same."

"You understand that working with us will be the fastest way to reach you goal, don't you? At the very least, it will be much easier than what you're doing now." The woman all but spat the words out as she stared down at the stage.

The third phase would no doubt be getting under way.

"I understand what you're saying, but I'm enjoying training my

new material. Besides—as I've said before—I enjoy fighting, but I'm sick of conflict."

"…I see. Then it can't be helped. But remember this. If you make yourself into our enemy, we will show you no mercy," the woman said impassively.

No sooner had she finished talking than the gemstone set in the necklace began to blaze with black light.

No, that isn't a gemstone… It can't be…

"Oh-ho. Is that a threat?"

"It's a warning. I, at least, am willing to show you some respect."

Xinglou chuckled quietly. "Heh-heh. I'm very grateful."

"…" The woman sighed once more, before slipping back into her robe.

Narcisse then made two mistakes.

The first was when, unable to keep his curiosity in check, he called out to the woman.

"Um, h-hold on a minute…!"

The second was realizing what the necklace actually was.

Both tragedies stemmed, no doubt, from his being a researcher.

"That… The stone in your necklace, it's urm-manadite, isn't it? That must mean that it's an…an Orga Lux…right?"

Orga Luxes, as the name suggested, were supposed to be weapons. He had neither seen nor heard of one being used as an accessory.

"What is it…?" Narcisse half murmured.

The woman, on the verge of leaving the room, came to a halt. "Well, now… If curiosity hasn't killed the cat…"

Xinglou's eyes, as she turned toward Narcisse, were filled with pity.

"…"

As the woman turned around, Narcisse thought for a moment that the necklace's urm-manadite had begun to glow again with that eerie, black light—when he suddenly lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 7
LADISLAV'S YOUNGEST CHILD

"*It's finally time for the third phase, the climax of the Gran Colosseo! To satisfy the conditions of this final phase, our remaining contestants will have to defeat the Jie Long Seventh Institute's two proud guardians within the time limit! And that's not all! This time around, contestants won't be disqualified no matter how many hits they receive!*"

"…That must mean they're not planning to hold back, I guess," Ayato murmured.

"Well, it'll be the real thing this time, seeing as the princess has had a hand in organizing it." Ernest nodded in agreement.

Ayato, Ernest, Sylvia, Hufeng, and Irene were the only contestants who had made it through.

Among them, Hufeng alone was, for some reason, wearing a sour face, seemingly deep in thought.

"What is it, Zhao?" Sylvia called out to him.

"…Sorry. I've just got a bad feeling about this…," Hufeng answered, his expression unchanging.

"*Now then, let's welcome Jie Long's guardians to the stage!*"

With Eishirou's announcement, a huge hole opened up in the center of the stage, a powerful machine lifting something up to the surface.

"…So it *is* Baiqin and Heihu…" Hufeng, face pressed in his hands, sighed, his voice filled at once with both shock and despair.

Two giants, black and white, rose up to the stage. They didn't look at all like Puppets or powered suits, being more akin to handcrafted wooden statues. Their faces were simple masks, with gaping cavities for eyes, their arms disproportionately thick for

their bodies, and so long that their fists could almost touch the ground.

The guardians were considerably larger than the powered suits they had all fought in the second phase. The white giant was gripping a huge sword, the black one a gigantic spear. Their bodies were both covered in strange painted patterns.

"All right, kid, it's about time you started talking," Irene called out to Hufeng. "What the hell are those things?"

"Kid…?" Hufeng frowned in annoyance for a short moment, before quickly turning his attention back to the two guardians. "The white one there is called Baiqin, and the black one Heihu. They're *sengu* left behind by the first Ban'yuu Tenra. I guess you could call them wardens of the Hall of the Yellow Dragon."

"Sengu?"

"Historically, every Ban'yuu Tenra has excelled in pyrotechnics. They've each created many different weapons among them. We call them *sengu*, or sage tools… But they aren't supposed to be taken outside of Jie Long." Hufeng, it seemed, was at a loss to explain exactly why they had been.

"What the hell does all that matter? Are they strong?"

"…They wouldn't be wardens if they weren't, right?"

No sooner had Hufeng finished talking than Eishirou's voice resounded throughout the stadium. "*Phase Three—begin!*"

But even with the opening of the match, Baiqin and Heihu remained motionless, frozen in their battle postures.

Ayato held out his Lux, pointing it toward the guardians as he tried to get a sense of his opponents, but the two statue-like figures remained unfathomable.

They were neither machines nor living creatures, and they were different again from the magical beasts that Gustave Malraux had summoned to fight against them in Lieseltania. They were something new, something unknown that Ayato had never before encountered.

"Tch, that's not going to do anything."

Irene, her temper flaring, stepped forward, when—

"Wha—?!"

Heihu moved like a sudden burst of wind to shorten the distance between them, mowing her down with its spear.

Irene quickly crouched down to dodge the attack, but Heihu rotated the direction of its swing, driving the spear into her

stomach.

"Argh!"

Irene, thrown all the way across the stage by the force of the strike, crashed into the defensive barrier protecting the spectators before falling to the ground in a heap.

"Irene!" Ayato called out in panic.

"D-damn it…! Looks like I let my guard down…," she sputtered, rising to her feet unsteadily as a trickle of blood began to drip from the corner of her mouth.

She seemed somehow to not be too much the worse for wear, but there was no way she'd be able to jump straight back into the contest.

The guardian's strength, capable of disabling Irene with a single blow, and its speed besides were of course a problem, but for Ayato, what was most troubling of all was that he couldn't sense their presence.

"This isn't funny… How can it move that fast without my being able to sense it…?"

Ayato had turned his attention to Irene for only a split second, but it was enough of an opening for Baiqin to appear behind him, swinging its sword downward to where he was standing.

"Ugh…"

He parried the attack before leaping under the guardian's outstretched arm.

He lunged out with his own weapon as he passed underneath it, but while his opponent looked to be made of wood, it must have been of extraordinary construction, as his attack seemed to have left no damage whatsoever.

Baiqin turned its face toward him, preparing itself to launch another attack, when—

Hufeng sprang toward it, driving a powerful kick into its flank and throwing it across the stage.

He leaped after the fallen guardian in pursuit, landing atop its torso and delivering a flurry of punches and a final spinning kick into its abdomen, before jumping to safety.

His speed was unbelievable. Even Ayato had barely been able to catch it. To any ordinary person, it must have looked as if he had simply teleported across the stage.

He must be using his prana to accelerate his attacks…!

Ayato had noticed that Hufeng was always directing his prana

into his legs.

Prana could be used to increase one's defensive and offensive abilities, but there was no theoretical reason why it shouldn't be able to increase one's speed, too.

However, increasing one's speed was by far the most difficult of the three. All it took was the slightest mistake and one would lose control of their body. Leaving aside recklessly jumping away from attacks, extraordinary proficiency was necessary to use it in a battle that required accurate movements.

Sylvia, dodging an attack by Heihu, leaped back, landing next to Ayato. "Oh, looks like he's fast," she remarked, staring after Hufeng.

"It must be like threading a needle, having that kind of control over one's prana…," Ayato replied, struck with admiration.

It also happened to be the area in which he needed the most improvement himself.

"It looks like the acceleration also adds to his strength. It's almost frightening."

"…It still doesn't look like he's dealing much damage, though."

Hufeng was overwhelming Baiqin with his speed and sheer number of punches, but he didn't seem to be delivering anywhere near enough damage to defeat it.

As Sylvia had said, every single one of those strikes ought to have been sufficiently destructive by themselves, but none of the remaining contestants had any idea what the two guardians were made from.

"We'd better take these things seriously…" Sylvia chuckled. "But not being allowed to sing is *so* annoying!"

For most Stregas and Dantes, not being able to use their abilities could be fatal.

The fact that Sylvia was still able to pull her weight despite being the only Strega in the competition was proof enough that she wasn't reliant on her abilities, possessing potent combat skills and training as well.

"But there's no point asking for the impossible. I'll just have to make do with what I've got," Sylvia said, holding her glowing Lux in the air.

"Meteor Arts? With a Lux that you've just started using…? That's impressive."

"If I'm going to be number one, I have to be able to at least do

this much," Sylvia responded airily.

To Ayato, however, it would have been an impossible feat.

"Well now, Ayato. Shall we?"

"After you."

Sylvia gave him a cute wink in lieu of a reply, before leaping to parry Heihu's spear.

"Thanks for coming," Ernest, who until that moment had been fighting the guardian alone, noted calmly. He looked to have only been defending himself against the giant's attacks, without attempting to land one of his own. His face was unmarred by so much as a single bead of sweat.

"Are you only here to watch, Pendragon? If you're not going to fight properly, you might as well scurry off home."

"I can't do that. The Lei-Glems would desert me if I turned my back on a woman in need." Ernest, his voiced troubled, raised his sword as if to strike, but Ayato was a step faster, rushing in from behind.

"Oh."

"Amagiri Shinmei Style Grappling Technique: *Stance Breaker!*"

Ayato slipped under Heihu's reach, throwing it off-balance by aiming for the spear pushing against Sylvia's blade. Then he delivered a sideways kick with all his strength upon its leg.

No matter how large one's opponent was, defeating them was easy so long as you could throw them off-balance.

Shaking violently, Heihu collapsed forward, and Sylvia's sword flashed as she struck at the staggered giant.

"Ugh, this thing's really tough!" Sylvia grunted.

But Ayato didn't pause to respond, running behind the guardian and swinging his own blade in a straight stroke. The attack, however, still wasn't strong enough.

"How about this, then?"

Ayato raised his head in surprise at the sound of the voice to see that Ernest had thrust his sword into the cavity in Heihu's face, all the way down to the hilt.

His blade was glowing just like Sylvia's—he, too, was using Meteor Arts.

It looked like Sylvia hadn't been joking, Ayato mused.

"*Wonderful, absolutely wonderful! A coordinated attack by* three *number ones! Just look at that explosive force!*"

"Hey, what do you think you're doing, taking the best part for

yourself?" Sylvia called out.

Ernest, however, had begun to back away from the giant figure, his expression grave.

"…It didn't work."

"What…?"

"*Ladies and gentlemen, look! Even that wasn't enough to stop our guardian! What hardiness! What strength!*"

Heihu sluggishly pulled itself upright, hefting its spear as if it hadn't suffered even the slightest injury.

"I thought its eyes were its weak point. I don't know what's inside that thing, but it seemed to suck my blade right in. There wasn't even any resistance."

“That’s…” Ayato had no idea how to respond.

“We’ll have to change our strategy. It doesn’t look like aiming for its weaknesses will work. We’ll have to—”

But before she could finish, Sylvia suddenly fell silent.

“Sylvie?”

Even when Ayato called out to her, she showed no reaction.

Ayato had never seen her wear that kind of expression before. Her amethyst-like eyes were frozen wide open, her lips trembling with fear. Her usual joy seemed to have been painted over with shock and confusion, as if she had lain eyes on something that she simply couldn’t bring herself to believe.

Ayato followed her gaze toward the highest level of the arena.

Is that the special viewing room…?

“I’m sorry, Ayato. I’m going to have to retire,” Sylvia said with an evasive smile, before holding out her Lux. “You should take this.”

“Huh? H-hold on! Sylvie?!” But by the time he could call out after her, she had already taken off toward the entrance gate.

“*Wh-what’s this? Has Sylvia Lyyneheym given up midway?*” Eishirou’s perplexed voice resounded through the stadium, a stir erupting through the stands.

Sylvia, however, paid them no attention, disappearing through the gate.

“What’s going on…?” Ayato strained his eyes, trying to make out whatever it was that she had seen.

It was the special viewing room. On the other side of the glass, a shadow in the shape of a woman seemed to be looking down at him.

The moment he saw her, a chill ran down his spine.

She turned at once away from the window, but it was enough to leave him trembling.

What on earth was that…?

It wasn’t fear.

It was a more primitive response, an urge to flee, to put as much distance as he possibly could between himself and a completely incompatible form of existence.

If he had ever encountered anything like it before—

It’s almost like when the Gravisheath took over Irene’s body!

A roar of laughter, filled to the brim with malice and bringing with it a sense of dread, had taken hold of him.

If Sylvia was going to confront that figure…

"This is bad…! Sorry, Ernest, I'm going to have to retire, too!"

"What?! What's going on?" Ernest called out after him, but Ayato had already taken off in the direction of the gate.

Before he could reach it, however, Baiqin put itself between him and his goal, as if to block his escape.

At that moment, Irene's ferocious laugh flooded the area. "Oh no you don't! Thought you'd underestimate me, huh? You piece of trash!"

She was smiling savagely, her shoulders rising up and down with her heavy breathing. She must have returned to the battle without Ayato's having realized it, delivering a punch to the pit of the guardian's stomach so powerful as to leave a huge impression of her fist in the wood-like substance.

Hufeng, off to the side, stood dumbfounded.

But even so, the blow didn't seem to have slowed the guardian in the slightest.

Baiqin reared itself up yet again, turning its hollow eyes toward Ayato.

It seemed to want to stop him specifically from leaving.

"…Sorry, but I'm in a hurry. I guess you won't let me through, huh?" Ayato doubted that the guardian would listen to him, but he had to try.

Letting out a short sigh, Ayato crouched low, readying himself with the blade-type Lux in his right hand and Sylvia's rapier-like Lux in his left.

Baiqin stood still for a long moment, watching Ayato's movements, before bringing its sword down with its right hand the instant he came within its range.

Ayato parried the attack, then twisted his body to dodge a swipe from its left hand.

Using the momentum to keep moving, he slipped under its guard, and—

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Dual-Sword Middle Technique: *Hell Spider!*"

Attacking slantwise from the left, slicing from the right, twisting

his body, thrusting from the right, attacking again slantwise from the left, slicing from the right, spinning around once more, before delivering a final powerful thrust from the right—Ayato lashed out with seven consecutive attacks, all aimed at precisely the same spot: the imprint left by Irene's fist.

"…"

This time, at last, it worked.

The last thrust pierced the guardian's torso.

As Ayato pulled the blade back out, Baiqin fell motionless to the ground.

"*Well, what do we have here? Contestant Amagiri has defeated one of the guardians! And…wait, what? It looks like he's left the stage! Not even I know what's going on anymore!*"

Ayato hurried after Sylvia, ignoring the echoes of Eishirou's bewildered voice.

"He really is something…"

Ernest couldn't help looking on with admiration at Ayato's swordsmanship as he turned to take on Heihu alone.

And Kirin Toudou, also from Seidoukan, was supposedly better still.

When it came to close combat, however, Jie Long's Hagun Seikun was probably the strongest—if one left Xinglou out of the equation, that was.

But there was something in Ayato Amagiri's fighting style, a brightness that the other two students lacked: the brilliance of someone who had learned to control their innermost fears.

Ernest, dodging Heihu's attacks, couldn't stop himself from grinning.

"Well, now that everyone's shown the crowd their skills, it wouldn't be fair for me to keep holding back," he said to himself, easily meeting Heihu's downward attack, their weapons locking together.

The guardian must have put all of its power into the strike, but Ernest's arm didn't budge an inch.

"Looks like I've gotten a little rusty, relying on the Lei-Glems all the time. This should be just like the old days." He let out a hearty laugh as he began to push the guardian's spear away from him.

*

There was no doubt about it.

She hadn't been mistaken.

It was *her*.

Sylvia ran through the corridors of the Sirius Dome.

Because the area leading to the special viewing room was closed to the general public, there was no one to call out to her in pursuit.

She turned the last corner to the room when she saw her silhouette at the end of the passage.

"Ursula!" Sylvia called out her name.

But the figure continued down the passage, without so much as pausing.

Closer now, she tried calling out again. "Wait! Ursula!"

At last, the figure came to a halt and slowly turned around.

Her face was half covered by the hood of her robe, but that was enough to be sure.

There was no way that Sylvia could have forgotten it.

"It *is* you, Ursula…" Sylvia smiled, trying as hard as she could to keep her emotions from flooding out.

But—

"Who are you?"

"Huh…?" Sylvia's smile froze in place at the coldness of the words.

"Ursula…?"

There was no mistaking that the voice, the face belonged to the woman Sylvia knew.

But then she noticed something.

They were the same but different. Something about her was unmistakably different.

"I see… You know this body, don't you?"

Sylvia, unthinking, took a step backward, her flesh creeping at the sound of the woman's words.

"Who…are you?"

"I have no need for names."

A sudden wind swept through the corridor as a black light began to emanate from inside the woman's robe.

The wind lifted up her hood, exposing her face.

Her face was undoubtedly that of Ursula Svend, but her eyes were empty, reflecting nothing. Instead, the necklace strung around her neck throbbed with a pulsating darkness, as if glaring at her.

“Wh-what…?!” At that moment, Sylvia reeled from an intense pain that struck between her eyes.

It was so strong that she almost lost consciousness. She fell to her knees, unable to keep herself standing.

Some nauseating presence was fumbling through her mind, turning everything upside down as it sifted through her thoughts.

“…I will have to erase your memories.”

Don’t tell me…! Mind control…?!

“Don’t resist, unless you want me to break something. Not that I care.”

“Ar— Argh…!”

Normally, mind control was supposed to have little effect on Genestella—and besides, the Ursula that Sylvia knew wasn’t a Strega.

Then what is this?!

“Ugh…!”

Sylvia pushed back with all her strength, leaping backward and breaking loose from the black light.

That alone was enough to ease the pain that had been sweeping through her body.

The effective range of whatever that ability was must have been quite short.

“You’re a stubborn one. And overflowing with prana, I see.”

“…I’ll ask again. Who are you?” Sylvia glared, but the woman payed her no heed.

“What would you do if I told you?”

“That’s… I…”

“You already know that I can’t give you the answer that you want. So why do you insist on knowing?”

Sylvia could only clench her fists at those cold, emotionless words.

“It doesn’t matter. Humans are fickle creatures. Such a waste.” The woman stepped forward.

Sylvia drew backward, drawing her Lux from her waist—and hesitated.

If she hurt Ursula…

But that momentary hesitation was enough to dampen her movements.

“How naive.”

At that moment, the black light descended upon her.

“Arghhhhh!”

“You won’t get away this time.”

The pain shooting through her head was of a completely different quality than before.

She couldn’t even think properly.

“…*Here’s* one.”

Sylvia could only look on in agony as she felt something incredibly dear to her being snatched away.

No! Not that!

Someone… Anyone…

“Help…me…!”

Just before her eyes could erupt with tears—

“Sylvie!”

Someone called out her name, and the black light that had been assailing her completely dispersed.

“Ugh, you cut off my power…?” A tremor ran through the woman’s voice for the first time.

Sylvia, released from the clutches of that terrible pain, sinking perhaps into relief at having been able to protect what was so precious to her, felt the strength seeping from her body.

Her consciousness receded. Just before she could fall flat on the floor, someone’s gentle arms wrapped around her.

“Are you okay, Sylvie?”

“Ah…?”

When she opened her eyes, she clearly saw Ayato’s worried face focused on her.

Even she could hear her heart pounding.

“Y-yes… Thank you, Ayato…” She averted her gaze, unable for some reason to look him in the eyes.

“What on earth was all that?” Ayato, holding her in his arms, was still on alert, the Ser Veresta ready in his free hand.

“The Blade of the Black Furnace? I see… Ayato—”

But before she could finish speaking, the black light again descended toward them.

Sylvia’s body stiffened, but the pain that she had felt before didn’t come.

Instead, the black light wrapped itself around the Ser Veresta’s urm-manadite core, as if trying to consume the blade’s red glow.

As the red glow dimmed, the sword’s pure-white blade blurred, before finally losing its shape completely and dissipating into the

air.

Mind control…? Against an Orga Lux…*?*

"You live up to your reputation." The woman laughed, her gaze fixed on the Ser Veresta. "That was quite a struggle, but now it's time to rest."

Ayato, stunned, stared at the hilt of the Ser Veresta for a moment, before deactivating it.

"…I don't know who you are, but it looks like I've met all kinds of people today," he joked, sweat running down his brow as he activated his blade-type Lux.

"Oh, so you won't retreat? You have quite the spirit. I can see why the Ser Veresta chose you to wield it."

For the third time now, the black light began to swell.

Ayato, however, far from faltering, began to look for a weakness in the woman's defenses—

"What the hell was up with Ayato? Running off the stage all of a sudden like that…"

"…I'm more worried about that idol. Something about it all didn't feel right."

"Uh, but you know, he *did* look really serious, so maybe something happened…?"

Several people, it seemed, were making their way up the corridor.

"…Tch."

The black light swelled up, covering the entire corridor in darkness.

"Wha—?!"

They were suddenly surrounded by a darkness so profound that Sylvia couldn't even sense Ayato's presence beside her.

"I'll warn you now, girl. Don't ever think about getting involved with me again."

"—!" Sylvia bit her lip, unable to respond to that voice echoing through the darkness.

When the darkness finally faded into a murky haze and they could begin to see in front of them again, the hooded woman had disappeared.

"…Did she run away?"

"…It looks like it."

"I see," Ayato said with relief, his back to the wall as he continued to hold Sylvia in his arms. "To tell you the truth, I was

already at my limit."

At that moment, a tremendous amount of mana began to encircle him as several magic circles opened up simultaneously.

"Is that your seal…?" Sylvia asked, remembering the rumors that had been circulating about him during the Phoenix.

Apparently, the seal placed on him only let him use his full power for a limited amount of time.

But given that Jie Long's contestants had tried to take advantage of that and failed, everyone thought that he'd managed to overcome that weakness…

"Well, you know… Matches are one thing, and I didn't think this event would—" But he couldn't finish his sentence before crying out in pain. Chains spewed from the magic rings building around him, wrapping around his body.

"A-Ayato?! Are you okay?"

"Y-yeah… I think so. It's not as bad as last time…" Ayato flashed her a courageous smile, but his whole body was dripping with sweat.

"That mana reaction—"

"Ah, Ayato!"

Hearing the sounds of footsteps running up behind them, Sylvia breathed a sigh of relief.

*

The airship was painted a pitch-black, from the balloon all the way to the propeller.

Its owner used it only a few times each year, and then only on moonless nights. Though registered to a certain millionaire, that owner's true identity was the student council president of the Le Wolfe Black Institute, Dirk Eberwein.

It was already past midnight, and the airships available for tourists seeking to enjoy the night scenery had long since closed up shop for the day.

"So? You must have some trouble to report, showing your face again after all this time," Dirk, leaning back on the cabin's sofa, spat out. "Don't let me stop you if you want to kill yourself, but don't drag me into it. Got it, Varda?"

The woman sitting across the table from him—Varda—shook her head. "This isn't my doing. Madiath's the one who gave me this

body. If you have anything to say, talk to him."

Madiath, sitting to her right, gave an exaggerated shrug. "She had no relatives, according to our information. Even after coming to Asterisk, she didn't seem to be particularly close to anyone. So if she *did* know anyone, it must have been before coming here."

"You've got to be kidding me. Of all people, that *someone* had to be the world's most famous songstress?" Dirk took a deep gulp from his already dry glass, crunching the ice between his teeth. "And you, you're telling me you didn't even recognize her? Just how ignorant are you?"

"*I* have no interest in those kinds of things. And besides, it's hard to tell one human from the next."

Her way of speaking, as if she had nothing at all to do with the matter at hand, only added fuel to Dirk's anger.

He understood well enough that she was that kind of being, but that fact didn't change his enmity toward her.

That said, there wasn't anything in this world that Dirk could really say that he *did* like.

"Fine. It doesn't look like there will be a fuss over it. Lucky for you, huh? And she's got no way of tracking you down, so why don't we just leave things alone?"

"I'm not particularly attached to this body, though."

"…Give me a break." Madiath sighed. "There aren't many humans with whom you have a high compatibility rating. We can't just procure more on a whim."

"You really can't access any of her memories?" Dirk sneered.

"I wouldn't say that. But that would mean coming into contact with this body's consciousness, and if I did that, she could wake up. I don't want to take that risk."

"Hmm, that's inconvenient," Madiath said, before putting his hands together as if to announce the end of that conversation. "Well, it's been a while since we've had every member of the Golden Bough Alliance in the one room. So let's move on to more important matters, shall we?"

"…Fine. But how many times do I have to tell you to quit using that shitty name? It makes me feel like puking. In the first place, all we're doing is helping one another out to see the plan through. It isn't a damn alliance."

"As cold as usual, I see. I quite like the name."

"So? How's the plan coming along?" Varda asked bluntly,

completely ignoring Dirk and Madiath's exchange.

"Relatively well, I should say. The groundwork, at least, is progressing smoothly," Madiath responded.

"Still can't do anything about the labor shortage, though," Dirk added.

"Which was precisely why I wanted to invite Xinglou Fan," Varda sniped back.

"What, this again?" Dirk fumed. "You almost had your identity blown because of that."

"We're talking about the labor shortage. Xinglou Fan would be an extremely valuable asset. It's worth the risk."

Madiath shook his head. "There's no mistaking that her years of experience would be of use to us, but I'm not confident about our ability to control her. As long as she says she won't oppose us, I'll be happy."

"No complaints from me." Dirk nodded. "If we brought her in the wrong way, she would only screw everything up. We're not so stupid as to poke a thicket knowing that a snake is going to jump out, are we?"

"Two against one, is it? I guess I have no choice, then." Varda sighed, letting the matter drop. She would abide by the majority decision, it seemed.

"As far as manpower is concerned, at worst, we should be okay so long as we have Orphelia. Or put another way, even if every other member of the Golden Bough Alliance were to disappear, she's the only piece that we can't afford to lose."

"…I told you to stop using that name," Dirk growled.

"In that case, there shouldn't be any problem expediting the plan, should there?"

Varda's suggestion wasn't an unreasonable one, but Madiath shook his head.

"I'm afraid that the stage still needs to be set. It's almost a ritual, after all. And besides, you would still want better results, wouldn't you?"

"…I can't disagree with the second part of that."

Dirk was fine either way. The faster they got around to it all, the less trouble they would have, but the better prepared they were, the more fun it would be.

"Well then, about the commander of the guard—"

"Before we get to that, let me ask you something."

“Hmm? What is it, Dirk?”

“Madiath, you haven’t said a damn thing about Haruka Amagiri. I thought you’d taken care of everything, but now I hear she’s found her way into the hospital.”

“You don’t say? I would have expected you of all people to get wind of that sooner.” Madiath gave an affected laugh. “We can’t dispose of her. You should understand that by now.”

“Having her around is convenient to you personally, you mean?”

“Exactly. It has nothing to do with you.”

Dirk clicked his tongue and furrowed his brow. “Fine. One more thing.”

“Go ahead.”

“Sorry to bring this up again, but it sounds like Ayato Amagiri had something to do with that thing with Varda.”

“…What of it?” Madiath’s eyes narrowed.

“He’s dangerous. We should crush him now, while we have the chance.”

“It was just a coincidence this time.”

“That doesn’t matter. I’m telling you, he and the Ser Veresta are going to be a problem.” Dirk knew it intuitively.

“My, my, you really do dislike him, don’t you?”

“And it looks to me like *you’re* going out of your way to protect him.”

Dirk’s and Madiath’s gazes collided for a long, drawn-out moment.

“…Haah.” Madiath was the first to look away. “He’s doing a great job for us, enlivening the Festa. We haven’t seen the kind of success we had with last year’s Phoenix for a long time. And it’s all thanks to him. That helps advance the plan in its own way, wouldn’t you say?”

“Tch…!” Faced with that kind of reasoning, Dirk had no response.

“Besides, he—or rather, his team—should add some spice to the upcoming Gryps.”

“Oh? Did you hear something?”

“Who knows?” Madiath smirked. “That all depends on young Enfield. I have high hopes for her.”

EPILOGUE

"Phew…"

Sylvia shut off the shower, letting out a deep sigh as she swept back her wet hair.

She had returned to her room, washed her sweat-coated body, and finally was able to relax.

Even so, she still hadn't been able to fully process everything that had happened that day.

But at least she could be certain that Ursula was in Asterisk.

Even if she was no longer the Ursula that she'd known.

"…But it's okay. There's no need to be in such a hurry anymore. I'll find out what's happened to you," Sylvia muttered to herself, letting out a weak laugh.

Sylvia Lyyneheym was bad at giving up.

Just when she wound the bath towel around her body and began to head back to her bedroom, her mobile began to ring.

The caller was—

"Ayato…?" Sylvia wondered, opening an air-window.

"*Sylvie? Sorry to call you this late— H-hey, what are you wearing?!*"

"Ah, I just got out of the shower."

"*Y-you didn't have to answer right away! Or you could set it to voice only!*" Ayato was trying to avert his eyes on the other side of the air-window, turning his face away.

"Ha-ha, it's nothing. Look, I'm wearing a bath towel."

"*That's not the problem!*" There was something indelibly cute about Ayato's bright-red face. Sylvia couldn't keep herself from chuckling.

This Ayato was a completely different person than the one who had come to save her.

“What’s up?” she asked with a smile.

Ayato was obviously still embarrassed, continuing to avoid her gaze. “*…Um…I mean…I was just wondering whether you were okay… You know, after what happened today?*”

“You were worried about me? That means a lot.”

In the end, Ayato’s team members arrived just as Ursula had disappeared. She had parted ways with him shortly after. If she had stayed back, they would have no doubt wanted her to explain what had happened.

She didn’t want to drag them all into her fight.

So now, she changed the subject with a chipper tone: “Right, I only just saw it in the news. You defeated one of those guardians after I retired, right? You looked amazing!”

“*Ah yeah. But it wasn’t such a big deal. Looking at the video, it looks like Fairclough was much more impressive…*”

“He sure was, wasn’t he? I was a bit surprised.”

Ernest had dealt with the remaining Heihu single-handedly, his swordsmanship at a level that Sylvia had never before seen.

“Ah, the event was something, but I really had a good time on our date. It was fun. Thank you.”

“*That’s good to hear, but—*”

“Right! Next time I can take a break, we’ll have to—”

“*Sylvie*,” Ayato cut her off, turning to face her directly, his tone of voice serious. “*That person was the teacher you were looking for, wasn’t she?*”

He had cut straight to the heart of the topic that she had been trying to avoid.

I guess I should have expected as much from him…, Sylvia thought, resigning herself.

“…Yes. Her name was Ursula Svend. She’s the one who taught me how to sing.”

“*Then why was she…?*” Ayato tried to avoid asking the question, but it was clear what he meant.

“I don’t know, but she seemed like a completely different person. She didn’t even remember who I was…”

“*She didn’t remember you?*”

“No. And she never had that kind of strange power… At least I don’t think she did… Or maybe I just didn’t know…?”

What had Sylvie the most worried was the fact that she’d been asked whether or not she *knew this body*.

If she took that literally, it meant that the body was Ursula's, but there was someone else inside. That was clearly beyond the abilities of Stregas and Dantes.

If there was anything out there with that kind of power—

"*Sylvie?*" Ayato called out to her, his voiced filled with worry.

"Sorry. Anyway, I'm going to look into it," she finished.

"…"

This time, it was Ayato who fell silent, his expression filled with sympathy.

"…*I don't know what happened to your teacher*," he began in a measured tone, "*but at the very least, she's dangerous. I'm not just talking about that strange power, either… I don't know how to explain it, but it goes deeper than that.*"

"Yes, I know," Sylvia answered immediately.

"*Haah… Right.*" Ayato let out a heavy sigh, as if he had been expecting that. "*In that case, at least let me help you. Just let me know when you need me, and I'll come—*"

"I'm grateful to you, but I can't," Sylvia said without letting him finish.

"…*Why not?*"

"You're participating in the Gryps, right? You need to concentrate on that."

After all, Ayato had his own things that he needed to do, too.

Sylvia couldn't let him squander his time for her sake.

Ayato, however, broke into an amused smile. "*You said so yourself, right? That it's only natural to help someone in need.*"

Those were indeed the words that she had used.

"B-but… I also said *as much as one can*."

"*Don't worry. If it's for you, I can.*"

"—!" At that moment, Sylvia found herself swallowing her words. "*Haah…* That's not the kind of thing to say lightly…"

"*Huh?*"

"It's nothing," She shook her head, before taking a deep breath and turning to meet his gaze. "All right. If I need you, and you're not busy, will you help me?"

"*Of course.*"

"…Thank you."

They chatted a while longer about a bunch of trivial matters, until it came time for Sylvia to close the air-window.

“Argh, what am I supposed to do now…?!” she cried out loud into her empty room, pushing her forehead against the wall.

“Now I’ve really fallen for you…,” she muttered, in a voice so soft that she herself had trouble making it out.

AFTERWORD

Hi there, Yuu Miyazaki here.

Volume 7 of *The Asterisk War* is the start of the second arc of the story, dealing with the Gryps.

…Or at least, it was supposed to be, but as I'm sure you all noticed, the Gryps hasn't started yet. I had meant for it to start at the end of this volume, but there were so many things to write… Please pardon the delay.

Anyway, this volume was mainly about introducing some of the teams from the other schools that will be competing against Ayato and company during the Gryps and was structured around our new heroine, Sylvia, who made her appearance in Volume 5. It's a great relief to finally be able to give her the attention that she deserves.

I was also finally able to shine a spotlight on Claudia and the Pan-Dora. Claudia will be the main heroine during the Gryps arc, so I hope that you're all looking forward to hearing more about her.

Okiura has provided us with another wonderful cover. Julis and Sylvia look so wonderful on it! The composition, the colors—I'm completely taken by everything about it! And the frontispiece of Rusalka is also fantastic!

The second volume of Ningen's manga adaptation of *The Asterisk War* has also been released in paperback. It has an incredibly cute cover illustration of Saya, so please take a look at it! And of course don't forget that it's still being serialized in *Comic Alive*!

Also, let's all show our support for the manga adaptation of *The Asterisk War: The Wings of Queenvale* serialized by Akane Shou in *Bessatsu Shōnen* magazine! Some of the characters who appeared in

this volume made their debut in this side story, so please look out for them!

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who helped me out this time around.

To my editor, Mr. Ikemoto, thank you again for all your help. I know it hasn't been easy. I'd also like to express my deepest gratitude to Ohrui and everyone else in the editorial department, and most of all to my readers for their continued support.

I'm looking forward to seeing you again in the next volume.

Yuu Miyazaki
October 2014

characters

ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE

ERNESTA KÜHNE
A genius meteoric engineer; the pride of Allekant. Head of the Pygmalion faction.

CAMILLA PARETO
Specializes in Lux development, and inseparable from Ernesta. Head of the Ferrovius faction.

HILDA JANE ROWLANDS
Head of the Tenorio faction. Also known as the Great Scholar; Magnum Opus.

LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE

DIRK EBERWEIN
A devilishly clever young man known as the Devious King, Tyrant. The first non-Genestella student council president of Le Wolfe.

KORONA KASHIMARU
The student council president's secretary. Unranked, with no powers useful in battle despite being a Genestella.

IRENE URZAIZ
Ranked third at Le Wolfe. Alias the Vampire Princess, Lamiexia.

PRISCILLA URZAIZ
Unranked. Irene's younger sister, and a regenerative (a Genestella with healing powers).

ORPHELIA LANDLUFEN
The number one ranked student at Le Wolfe, two-time champion of the Lindvolus, and said to be the strongest Strega in Asterisk's history. Also known as the Witch of Solitary Venom.

ST. GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY

ERNEST FAIRCLOUGH
Student council president of St. Gallardworth Academy. Ranked first, alias the Paladin, Pendragon.

LAETITIA BLANCHARD
Student council vice president of St. Gallardworth Academy. Ranked second, alias the Witch of Shining Wings, Gloriana.

JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE

XINGLOU FAN
Student council president of Jie Long Seventh Institute. Successor to the alias Imminent Heaven, Ban'yuu Tenra and one of the strongest fighters in all Asterisk.

HUFENG ZHAO
Ranked fifth. An exceptional martial artist and Xinglou's star pupil. Alias the Peerless Thorn, Tenka Musou.

SHENYUN LI AND SHENHUA LI
Twin brother and sister, ranked ninth and tenth. Alias the Phantom Builder, Gen'ei Souki, and the Phantom Vanisher, Gen'ei Musin, respectively.

CECILY WONG
The *daoshi* who heads the Water sect, and Xinglou's second-highest-ranking disciple. Alias: the Flower of a Thousand Thunderbolts, Reigeki Senka. Ranked fourth at Jie Long.

XIAOHUI WU
Xinglou's highest-ranking disciple. Also known as the Celestial Warrior; Hagun Seikun. Ranked second at Jie Long.

QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

SYLVIA LYYNEHEYM
Student council president and first-ranked fighter at Queenvale; she placed second in the previous Lindvolus. Alias the Witch of Fearsome Melody, Sigrdrifa.

RUSALKA
An all-girl rock band composed of five members: Milute, Mahulena, Pilvi, Monica, and Tuula.

OTHERS

MADIATH MESA
Chairman of the Executive Committee for the Festa, granted full authority over the events by the six integrated enterprise foundations.

FLORA KLEMM
A ten-year-old girl from the orphanage Julis is supporting.

HARUKA AMAGIRI
Ayato's older sister; missing for five years.

THE WORLD OF *THE ASTERISK WAR* GLOSSARY

THE INVERTIA

A mysterious disaster that befell Earth in the twentieth century. Meteors fell all over the world for three days and three nights, destroying many cities. As a result, the strength of existing nations declined considerably, and a new form of economic power known as "integrated enterprise foundations" took their place.

A previously unknown element called *mana* was extracted from the meteorites, leading to advances in scientific technology as well as a new type of human with extraordinary powers, called Genestella.

The Invertia was undetected by all the observatories in the world, and the destruction it caused was actually much less than ordinary meteors, so the pervading theory is that it did not consist of normal meteors.

INTEGRATED ENTERPRISE FOUNDATION

A new type of economic entity formed by corporations that merged to overcome the chaotic economic situation following the Invertia. Their power far surpasses that of the diminished nations.

There used to be eight IEFs, but there are currently six: Galaxy, EP (Elliott-Pound), Jie Long, Solnage, Frauenlob, and W&W (Warren & Warren). They vie for advantage over one another and effectively control the world. Each one sponsors an academy in Asterisk.

THE FESTA

A fighting tournament where students compete, held in Asterisk, and operated by the IEFs. Each cycle, or "season," consists of three events: the tag match (Phoenix) in the summer of the first year, the team battle (Gryps) in the fall of the second year, and the individual match (Lindvalius) in the winter of the third year. Victory is achieved by destroying the opponent's school crest, and the rules are set forth in the Stella Carta. As the event is held for entertainment, acts of deliberate cruelty and attacks intended to cause death or injury can be penalized.

The event is the most popular one in the world, with matches broadcast internationally. The IEFs prioritize economic success and growth above all else, so the direction of the Festa has always been driven by the majority demand of consumers. (This is why the fighters are students—viewers want to see beautiful boys and girls fight one another.) Some speak out against the Festa on ethical grounds, but under the rule of the IEFs, those voices have fallen from justified dissent to unpopular opinion.

The cultures of the different schools veer to extremes, which is also by design, for the sake of the Festa.

THE STELLA CARTA

Rules that apply strictly to all the students of Asterisk. Those who violate these rules are harshly penalized, sometimes by expulsion. If a school is found to have been involved, the administration can also be subject to penalty. The Stella Carta has been amended several times in the past. The most important items are as follows:

- Combat between students of Asterisk is permitted only insofar as the intent is to destroy the other's school crest.
- Each student of Asterisk shall be eligible to participate in the Festa between the ages of 13 and 22, a period spanning ten years.
- Each student of Asterisk shall participate in the Festa no more than three times.

MANA

A previously unknown element that was brought to Earth by the Invertia. By now, it can be found all over the world. It responds to the will of living beings who meet certain criteria, incorporating surrounding elements to form objects and create phenomena.

GENESTELLA

A new type of human being, born after regular human children were exposed to mana. With an aura known as prana they possess physical abilities far beyond those of ordinary humans. Genestella who can tap into mana without special equipment are called Stregas (female) and Dantes (male).

Discrimination against Genestella is a pervasive social problem, and many students come to Asterisk to escape this. (The negative bias against Genestella is one reason why opposition to the Festa is in the minority.)

PRANA

A kind of aura unique to Genestella. Stregas and Dantes deplete prana as they use their powers. They lose consciousness if they run out of prana, but it can simply be replenished with time. The manipulation of prana is a basic skill among Genestella, and by focusing it, they can increase offensive or defensive strength. This is especially effective for defense, which explains why serious injuries among Asterisk students are rare despite the common use of weapons.

METEORIC ENGINEERING

A field of science that studies mana and the meteorites from the Invertia. Many mysteries remain pertaining to mana, but experimentation on manadite has advanced significantly. Fueled by the abundance of rare metals found in the meteorites, manadite research has yielded a large variety of practical applications.

MANADITE

A special ore made of crystallized mana. If stress is applied, it can store or retain specific elemental patterns. Before the Invertia, it did not exist on Earth, and it must be extracted from meteorites. Manadite is used in Lux activators, as well as manufactured products developed through meteoric engineering.

LUX

A type of weapon with a manadite core. Records of elemental patterns are stored in pieces of manadite and re-created using activators. By gathering mana from the surroundings, they can create blades or projectiles of light. Mana also acts as the energy source for Lux weapons.

URM-MANADITE

A name for exceptionally pure manadite, much rarer than ordinary manadite. Luxes using urm-manadite are known as Orga Luxes. Urm-manadite crystals come in myriad colors and shapes, and no two are the same. They are said to have minds of their own.

ORGA LUX

A weapon using urm-manadite as its core. Many of them have special powers, but using them takes a toll—a certain "cost." The weapons themselves have something akin to a sentient will, and unsuitable users cannot even touch the weapon. Suitability is measured by means of a compatibility rating.

Most Orga Luxes are owned by the IEFs and are entrusted to the schools of Asterisk for the purpose of lending them to students with high compatibility ratings.

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